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Transitioning Bodies, Transformative Stories: Live Performance of Transgender Autobiographical Narratives in the United States

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Transitioning Bodies, Transformative Stories: Live Performance of Transgender Autobiographical Narratives in the United States

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Abstract

Transitioning Bodies, Transformative Stories: Live Performance of Transgender Autobiographical Narratives in the United States

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The relationship between transgender communities and the autobiographical is historically and contemporarily contentious and complicated. Our autobiographies are demanded of us by the medical industry in order to gain access to healthcare; by the justice system in order to determine whether or not we are honest and worthy of safety and freedom; and by the media who perpetuate this system of what scholar Viviane Namaste calls the "autobiographical imperative," the expectation that trans people will offer the intimate details of our personal lives at any time to a curious cisgender audience. However, many trans people have also relied on each other's autobiographical narratives to learn how to navigate these same harmful systems, as well as find camaraderie, solidarity, and solace among one another.

To this end, I execute performance analyses of three works by transgender-identified artists to examine the ways in which each production engages with the complexities of the autobiographical for trans subjects: Shakina Nayfack's *One Woman Show* (2013), D'Lo's *To T or Not to* T (2019), and Sean Dorsey Dance's *Uncovered: The*

Diary Project (2009). I argue that each work in its respective form, narrative structure, and execution either circumvents, directly challenges, or illuminates the oppressive parameters imposed by the autobiographical imperative.

Additionally, I analyze on my own participation in a fictional piece of devised drama, *TRANSom* (2020), which I argue was subjected to what I have termed the "autobiographical assumption," a consequence of the autobiographical imperative where imaginative work by trans people is perceived to be autobiographical. Finally, I reflect on the existence of and possibilities for sharing trans narratives in the realm of social media where interaction and affirmation can be immediate quantified. While this project recognizes that visibility and representation are not answers to discrimination, violence, and poverty (and, in fact, as Black trans women scholars and activists like Tourmaline remind us, often open doors to increased harassment), I hope to encourage space for present and future works of performance which allow for trans artists to bring their stories to the stage in ways that are beneficial to the artists and their communities.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The first time that I knew I was in the room with another trans man was the first time that I saw Sean Dorsey Dance perform *Uncovered: The Diary Project* in New York City in 2009.

I have told the story of this experience more times than I can reliably count now. This anecdote was part of my 2016 Master's thesis on the harmful practice of casting cis people as trans characters in film and theater. I also tell the story to students when they are assigned a video recording of *Uncovered* as part of their coursework. I detail every moment of the experience: how I was 19 years old and home for the summer from my first year away at college, where I had encountered queer theory for the first time, and had also begun the process of fully embracing my identity as a trans person. I map out my route from my parents' home in New Jersey onto the bus that took me to Port Authority in Manhattan, then into the subway and onto the downtown 6 train, to Dixon Place, the theater where Dorsey and his company were performing that night, on Chrystie Street between Bowery and Houston.

When I tell this story, I am meticulous about the details of traveling to the theater and finding my seat; watching awestruck as genderfluid icon, performer, and theorist Kate Bornstein took the stage for the introductory act; and finally, spilling streams of tears from my eyes as Dorsey stood under the spotlight and used his body to tell the story of another trans man from the entries of his diary.

Before I knew I was transgender, I knew that I was a performer. I knew this to be a complicated, multi-faceted part of my identity: a description of my greatest artistic passion (theatrical performance) and the ways in which I moved through the world (everyday performance & performativity). I spent many years struggling with my own gender identity, trying on different names, hairstyles, and fashion trends in service to finding that nugget of wisdom that would tell me who I was supposed to be. Rather than feeling an innate sense of who I was and following that as a path to gendered identity, I deeply examined and explored the performativity of my gender expression to determine which combination elicited responses from other people that validated how I felt inside. Essentially, I constructed the presentation of my gender with an acute awareness of how other people received, processed, and perceived that information.

When I reached college, away from my hometown and the family and friends who knew me as someone I knew I was not, I used my academic inclinations to guide me further. I thought that I would find the truth in scholarly pursuits, in the books I read as part of my Women's & Gender Studies major. And it would be a lie to say that this did not happen. I read Judith Butler for the first time, and Michel Foucault and Jack Halberstam. With my continued interest in the performing arts, I read Laurence Senelick, Marjorie Garber, and Kate Bornstein. However, I feel confident in saying that in this respect, theory failed me. It gave me terminology, a way to explain why I might feel how I felt, but I did not feel any closer to the sense of belonging that I sought. Even with all the theory, when I entered the theater to see *Uncovered* that night, I was a person who had been given language to explain their identity, but no tangible evidence of its validity.

I watched Dorsey use his body as a vehicle for telling a moving story, for communicating ideas, and for creating beautiful images on stage. Dorsey's performance brought me a story that felt closer to my reality than anything I'd ever heard before, and he did so using a body that felt closer to what I'd imagined for mine than any I'd ever seen before. In his performance, I saw the potential of what a body like mine could do. I saw effervescent life in that body, right before my eyes. I was fully immersed in a moment of witnessing what a trans body like mine could become, what I could do with it, and how it could be a work of art.

Dorsey's performance did not reflect exactly what my experiences were or lay out a roadmap to follow in order to achieve my true self. In contrast, I feel that Dorsey's performance was the hammer that I used to shape my own reality by giving me the evidence I needed to fully embrace my identity as a trans person—an acceptance which has opened myriad possibilities for my future, as well as numerous paths toward healing. If Dorsey's performance was the hammer, the theory that I encountered during my studies was, perhaps, the nail; and my own identity the plank of wood. Carpentry metaphors aside, Dorsey's live performance as a trans man of a trans man's autobiographical material affected me in a way that abstracted theory never did and still never does.

Fueled by the powerful impact of *Uncovered*, in this dissertation, I analyze performance the live performance autobiographical narratives by transgender artists in the United States. I consider work which is created by trans artists which speak to the experiences of trans people using autobiographical narratives of people in the trans

community. I make a distinction here between "autobiographical work" in which the artist uses material from their own lives and work which utilizes autobiographical narratives which may or may not be their own. However, all of the work I consider here is created by trans artists and uses autobiographical material of other trans people. To this end, I examine the work of three U.S.-based transgender performers whose work, to varying degrees, includes autobiographical material: choreographer Sean Dorsey, actor and comedian D'Lo, and actress/producer Shakina Nayfack. In the final chapter, I analyze a piece of my own work: an original devised played, *TRANSom*, in which I served as a member of the devising ensemble and co-director.

Each of the three performances by other artists that I analyze utilize autobiographical material in a way that acknowledges, complicates, and/or challenges complex notions of the autobiographical for trans people. In *Uncovered: The Diary Project*, Sean Dorsey engages a practice of archival research to create an evening of modern dance based on the diary entries of pioneering trans activist Lou Sullivan. Shakina Nayfack performs original songs written specifically to reflect her autobiographical tale of self-discovery and transition in *One Woman Show*, a musical revue that doubled as a fundraiser for her transition. Family and community ties are emphasized in D'Lo's work, decentralizing the individual under the autobiographical gaze in service to a broader consideration of important relations.

Each of the preceding works also engage with the precarity of trans people's autobiographies. Our personal narratives have been used by others to erase us from history and subjugate us in the present, but many of us also turn to one another's

autobiographical stories to find hope for our futures. Dorsey's work uses the autobiographical to bring Sullivan into the canon of queer history. Nayfack establishes *herself* in the canon of musical theater performance with the songs based on her story, repurposing her personal narrative to benefit her own self professionally, personally, and financially. By shifting the focus of his autobiographical narrative from his own singular experiences to his experiences within his wider communities, D'Lo uses the genre of solo performance to disperse the often exploitative autobiographical gaze from the intimate details of his transition to the reverberations which occur amongst his web of relations.

My analysis of *TRANSom* shifts my focus from work which directly engages with the autobiographical to a piece which illuminates the problematic nature of the autobiographical. Despite being a work of fiction, *TRANSom* was assumed by some to be an autobiographical performance which directly reflected the lived experiences of its ensemble members. In the corresponding dissertation chapter, I identify this as evidence of what I term the "autobiographical assumption," inspired by Viviane Namaste's theory of the "autobiographical imperative," with which I heavily engage in this document.

LIVE PERFORMANCE & AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Before analyzing the specific uses of the autobiographical in these works, I must first begin by identifying the wider discourse around live performance and autobiography. Deirdre Heddon's 2008 text *Autobiography and Performance* lays much of the groundwork for my own theory and analysis. In her book, Heddon examines the work of U.S. and U.K. artists who create autobiographical performance. Heddon's

intention is to identify the "key issues that attach to [autobiographical] performance" (18) with a specific eye toward the relationship between the spectator and the performer. Subsequently, the text poses many questions regarding the ability of autobiographical performances to affect their audiences with regard to political thought or action. Through her argument, Heddon claims that autobiographical performances are "dialogues" in which the performer(s) and spectator(s) share time and space (5). The physical proximity between the subject/performer and the audience necessitates that the spectator will understand and receive the stakes of the subject's story more viscerally because they are sharing physical space with the storyteller.

For the sake of her text, Heddon attempts to define what she means when she uses the term "autobiographical performance." The initial definition that she constructs is: "work which foregrounds some aspect of a life-story, a *bio.* […] [The] *auto* signals the sameness of the subject and object of that story" (8, emphasis original). Essentially, Heddon's definition of an "autobiographical performance" is one in which the performer uses techniques of performance to tell their own life story. However, Heddon also clearly complicates this definition, acknowledging that an assumption of authenticity within performance is a problematic one to make, given that any work of performance is in some way mediated and curated: "The referential status of that *bio* is open to question and one task of this study is to theorize the relation between 'a life' and its performed representation" (9). In short, Heddon's work is aimed at not only analyzing what constitutes an autobiographical performance but also to construct theory around the very ways that attempting to do such a thing is a complicated task.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I do not define all the works being analyzed in this project as "autobiographical performances" as defined by Heddon's text above. Rather, what I claim to consider in *Transitioning Bodies, Transformative Stories* are performance works by trans artists that engage with autobiographical material generated by trans people, whether it be their own material or that which belongs to someone else. For some of the performances I consider, such as Shakina Nayfack's *One Woman Show* and D'Lo's *To T or Not to T*, Heddon's definition applies – these are performances wherein the performer and the subject of the autobiographical material are one in the same. However, such a definition does not apply to Sean Dorsey's *Uncovered* or to Ground Floor Theater's *TRANSom*. While *Uncovered* includes some autobiographical material from Dorsey himself, the life story that he foregrounds (to use Heddon's terminology) is that of Lou Sullivan. Hence, while the performance does foreground a life story, a *bios*, it lacks the emphasis of the *auto* wherein the subject and performer "collapse into each other as the performing 'I' is also the represented 'I'" (Heddon 8).

However, *TRANSom* occupies a particularly unique space within this dissertation because my argument regarding the work relies upon my assertion that it is not an autobiographical performance. As Heddon argues in her book, there is an "inevitability of the 'self' that lies in all acts of production, both creative and theoretical" (7). Therefore, to argue that *TRANSom* is bereft of any notion of the autobiographical would be inaccurate. In fact, the devising process that created the piece utilized autobiographical material from its ensemble members in order to generate narrative inspiration for improvisational exercises. Furthermore, aspects of the performance engaged with the

legacy of autobiographical performance within the trans community, particularly through the exploration of one character who makes his living as a professional YouTube vlogger. However, the performance presented a fictional narrative surrounding fictional characters which was never intended to be or advertised as autobiographical at all. Nevertheless, many spectators assumed that the performance was autobiographical. My analysis of the performance names and identifies the presence of this "autobiographical assumption" and the existing cultural sources by which it is fueled.

All of the works included in this project use live performance to present to audiences complex and multi-faceted experiences of being trans in the United States. If we acknowledge that there is an "inevitable 'self'" in all acts of creation, and even in a fictionalized narrative, one could also argue that an actor who shares particular traits with their character engages in an autobiographical performance even though the story is not their own. To help buttress my understanding of the autobiographical in performance, I turn to Wendy Hesford's assessment of "autobiographical acts" for historically marginalized groups. In her 1999 book *Framing Identities: Autobiography and the Politics of Pedagogy*, Hesford uses the term "autobiographical acts" to encompass the variety of artistic and expressive mediums through which a subject reveals autobiographical information. While making her analysis, Hesford engages with what she identifies as three stages of autobiographical writing and critique through history: the *bio*, the *auto*, and the *graphy*. The first (*bio*) she attributes to the earliest critics of the genre who viewed autobiographical writing as "a transparent medium through which life experience could be perceived – undistorted" (Hesford 18). During this stage,

autobiographical writing was interpreted as objective reporting on being human, without any consideration of subjectivity or the possibility of deliberate curation of the narrative by the autobiographical author Hesford traces this assumption of objectivity to the access and attention of autobiographical writing given to white male European authors, whose experiences were considered the default perspective on life. Put simply, because the identities of the authors were also the identities of the hegemonic and paternalistic authorities on writing, the work was considered to be objective and universal when it was actually deeply personal and subjective.

While literary critics of these narratives did not expect narratives to be objective, or without the author's specific views and opinions, the notion of subjectivity did not expand beyond the range of experiences possibly had by a member of the ruling class: white upper-class European men. It was expected that narratives of the same events would differ between writers due to the authors' individual circumstances, but the effects of power and privilege were never considered in ways that gave agency and subjectivity to those socially and legally marginalized by the systems which privileged the author. As such, the subsequent wave of autobiographical critique was concerned with the self (the *auto*). Hesford attributes this shift in critique to the advancement and popularity of psychoanalytic theory, causing critics and writers alike to begin turning the gaze of the autobiographical from the experiences of life to the experience of the self. During this time, critics maintained that previous notions of the autobiographical were untainted by subjective context but believed that autobiographers spoke of an "essential self" – while differences may be present in stories and subjectivity may be acknowledged, critics

believed that each author spoke of a singular unifying and driving force that connected all humans. However, despite the emphasis on a "unifying" force, Hesford notes that this view specifically excluded women autobiographers because women's personal narratives deviated from the linear arc of the pursuit of success present in male authors' narratives, instead focusing on more intimate and quotidian details of everyday life.

The autobiographies of marginalized subjects also necessitated a focus on the body, which was absent from the previous narratives by white male authors. This was due to the fact that these subjects experience their marginalization in society and culture by white men because of physical aspects of their bodies, those most notably at this time being sex and skin color. As a result, for these writers, acknowledging their own experiences also meant acknowledging their bodies – and, subsequently, their work brought the writing body into the body of writing, whether intentionally or not. This is not to say that the writing body is never present when reading work by hegemonically identified authors. However, the notion of objectivity identified earlier also brings with it an invisibility of identifiers which is not accessible to marginalized subjects. Put simply, because marginalized subjects experience discrimination in white Western society based on their physical attributes, when writing about their experiences in white Western society, their bodies are hyper-visible.

It is from this understanding of autobiography that Hesford constructs her own, which she uses for the remainder of her book. Hesford's methodology for studying autobiography requires the consideration of the act itself, as well as the framework surrounding the act and the material existence of the author. Hesford emphasizes two

central questions for her methodology: “Who is authorized to tell the truth? Whose truth is being told and to whom?” (20). By asking this question, Hesford argues that an autobiographical act not only creates the self but simultaneously illuminates the process of its creation in doing so. This aligns with Heddon’s argument that to perform one’s story is to also create one’s story. The process of presentation is always a re-presentation and representation of something which already exists, acknowledging the mediation of even that which is considered to be authentic. This is exactly the line of questioning missing from the modes of criticism which assumed authority and objectivity in the stories of the white male autobiographer.

Likewise, in “Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity: Two or Three Things I know For Sure,” Kristin Langellier writes that performing personal narrative “requires theory which takes context as seriously as it does text, which takes the social relations of power as seriously as it does individual reflexivity, and which therefore examines the cultural production and reproduction of identities and experience” (128). Put simply, because performance cannot be done outside of its context, every performed personal narrative exists within and is, subsequently, in conversation with that context. Like Hesford and Heddon argue above, Langellier suggests that the process of *performing* personal narrative inherently requires and provokes a consideration of matrices of power and privilege. As such, she continues, personal narrative performance is “especially crucial to those communities left out of the privileges of dominant culture” precisely because our identities are constituted by a combination of “performed story” and the contexts within which those stories are made and performed (Langellier 128-

129). Following this logic, anytime a person who is a member of a marginalized group performs a personal narrative for an audience, they are participating in a dialogue about the very social and legal constructs which dictate their marginalization.

Ann Cooper Albright speaks specifically about the affirming potential of autobiographical performance in her book *Choreographing Difference.* Here, Albright acknowledges inherent performativity within the literary discourse around autobiography. Referencing the work of Paul Eakins, Albright highlights the feminist studies shift around autobiographical writing from a discourse of confession, "a truthful revelation of a singular inner and private self" to that of "a dramatic staging of a public persona" (121). In doing so, Albright acknowledges that writing is, of course, a physical act; the body is engaged in the act of writing and, particularly when writing autobiographically, the body is at once the vehicle for and subject of the writing.

This is also the case in autobiographical performance, but a key difference persists. In autobiographical performance, the body is present as narrative subject, as vehicle, and as a physical presence alongside that of the audience/spectator(s). The performer and the performer's audience share the same physical space, which creates, for Albright, a "double discourse" which "[asserts] the somatic reality of experience while also foregrounding its discursive nature" (125). The body that the story is about is also the body with which the audience shares space in order to witness the story's performance. The "performing body" in this instance is not unlike the "writing body" which is responsible for putting the words down on paper; however, the sharing of

physical space means that audiences observing the performing body are doing just that: *observing* the body as it performs the story of this body.

The key for autobiographical performance is that the audience engages in the act of perceiving the body in its cultural context while also experiencing the story being told. By "discursive nature" in the previous quotation, Albright refers to the fact that no material existence or assumed identity is recognized without cultural mediation – without its context. For Albright, because the body is always received and perceived in a cultural context, autobiographical performance centralizes the body and rejects essentialism by necessitating that the performer "restage the history of one's body" (125). In the performances that I analyze in this project, the presentation of one's own trans story via one's own trans body is a direct enactment of Albright's argument. In this way performances of trans autobiographical material hold the potential to affirm trans identity and experience and reject false narratives meant to pacify ciscentric and transphobic anxieties. If you are present for my trans autobiographical live performance, my trans body now, my trans body then, and my future trans body are all in the room with you right now.

THE TRANS COMMUNITY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACTS

However, it is myopic to suggest that the presentation of the trans body (past, present, and future) is a singularly affirmative one. The politics of visibility and the ability to claim public space are dictated by the same matrices of oppression that assume objectivity in and obscure the identity of the white male author. In this way, being

invisible is a privilege afforded to those whose experiences are considered to be the norm. The intrinsic emphasis on the body that comes with the autobiographical writings of marginalized subjects is one that renders these subjects hyper-visible, unable to evade a certain level of observation. As marginalized subjects, with this observation comes scrutiny, surveillance, and often, subsequent subjugation.

Reina Gossett[1], Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton tackle questions of visibility for trans artists and activists in their 2017 anthology, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. With the face of Marsha P. Johnson emblazoned on the cover, this text identifies and engages with the complexities of visibility as a purported avenue to equity and justice for trans subjects, particularly Black trans women and sex workers. In the introduction to the book, the editors acknowledge that with increased visibility in media-based and visual mediums seems to also come increased backlash, violence, and unwanted attention socially, legally, and judiciously, citing the increased amount of violence against Black trans women at the same time that *Time* magazine deemed the second decade of the 21st century as the U.S.'s "transgender tipping point" (xvi).

The oft-quoted headline of the "transgender tipping point" appeared on the June 9, 2014 issue of *Time* and featured the image of television and film actress Laverne Cox, a Black trans woman, next to the subheading: "America's next civil rights frontier." The

[1] This scholar's name changed to Tourmaline between the publishing of *Trap Door* and the submission of this dissertation; as such, I will refer to her as Tourmaline unless I am required to use her former surname for the purposes of citations. However, this brings up deeper issues of practices regarding academic honesty, plagiarism, credit, and naming that is particularly important for acknowledging and honoring the work and identities of trans people in academic work.

image and accompanying words indicate a sad and frustrating irony and violent ignorance from mainstream media and cisgender journalists. It belies a refusal or inability to acknowledge the borderline genocide of Black trans women in the United States and the audacity to use the image of a Black trans woman to declare that trans people are reaching a moment of judicial and social reckoning; not to mention the suggestion that any civil rights movement in U.S. history is inextricable from one another or has ever been resolved. Chris E. Vargas, founder of the Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art, aptly rebrands this moment as "a Caitlyn-tinted Trans-Jenner Tipping Point," referring to the way that, in the wake of this headline and article, much of the media attention focused on Caitlyn Jenner, the wealthy white trans woman who openly discussed her transition in print and screen media (133). Meanwhile, Cox openly challenged invasive and inappropriate questioning about other trans women's bodies in public appearances, such as when she defended trans supermodel Carmen Carrera after being asked questions about her genitals by TV personality Katie Couric on a public daytime television interview (McDonough).

Canadian scholar and activist Viviane Namaste deemed this phenomenon "the autobiographical imperative" – "a natural progression of a social relation in which non-transsexuals determine when and where transsexuals can speak" (49) set in place by the cisgender individuals who control the North American media and entertainment landscape. In her 2001 book *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions, and Imperialism*, Namaste outlines how the boundaries placed upon conversations that proliferate the autobiographical imperative demand that trans people

answer questions about their private and personal lives, their bodies, and the intricate details of their transition processes for the consumption of a curious cisgender audience. Additionally, when the autobiographical imperative is at work, it also dictates which trans experiences are addressed and which trans bodies are chosen to be represented within the conversation. Overwhelmingly, these individuals "abide by the codes of a middle class discourse" (51) of whiteness, professionalism, and heteronormativity within which their race and class privileges, as well as the directed focus on their transition, does not make room for a discussion of the institutional oppression faced by less privileged members of the trans community. Namaste establishes the autobiographical imperative as part of "the circular loop of the two mechanisms of [media] exclusion (outright refusal of access, and representation to satisfy the curiosity of the non-transsexual viewer)" (46). Essentially, Namaste argues, we are prohibited from accessing the means of knowledge and cultural production on our own terms, and when we are handed what feels like the tools necessary to do so, it is with strict restraints over what we can do with what allowance we have been given.

The focus on the autobiographical by exploitative journalists has made the practice of telling our personal stories often detrimental to our own growth and safety. Additionally, this harmful practice exists outside of the media and in other pertinent parts of our lives, particularly in the medical field. In his 1998 text *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Jay Prosser claims that "every transsexual, as a transsexual, is originally an autobiographer" (101). First, it is important to note that in Prosser's book, as well as in some other texts I will discuss, the term "transsexual" is used very

specifically to reference trans-identified people who pursue medical means of transition, such as Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) and Gender Affirming Surgery (GAS). As such, when Prosser claims that all transsexuals are autobiographers, he acknowledges the ways in which trans people who wish to access medical transition are asked to construct and perform an autobiography that satisfies the narrative arc expected by the clinician. The "second skin" to which the book's title makes reference is "the story the transsexual must weave around the body in order that this body may be 'read'" (Prosser 101).

Many scholars, both trans and cis, have discussed the inextricable link between trans-focused medical discourse and trans autobiography. From a trans-exclusionary gender-critical perspective, in her 1995 book *Changing Sex,* cisgender feminist scholar Bernice Hausman purports that trans people write and consume autobiographical texts to manipulate medical discourse in their pursuit of resources for medical transition. Hausman's central thesis asserts that transsexuals reinforce colonialist patriarchal restrictions of binary gender, arguing that trans autobiographies "institute a discursive hegemony within a community whose members have a substantial investment in mimicking the enunciative modality of […] successful transsexuals" (337). In other words, Hausman suggests that pre-transition transsexuals learn to replicate gender stereotypes as they seek guidance from their post-transition peers because transition is, according to Hausman's argument, a process of conforming to these stereotypes.

While I fundamentally disagree with Hausman's argument, her theorization around the adherence to gender stereotypes rings true. Historically, there has been an

expectation that any trans person seeking transition-related medical treatment is doing so in order to fulfill hegemonic roles surrounding gender and sexuality. Until 1981, to be given approval for any form of medical treatment related to their transition, trans-identified patients were required to undergo a Real-Life Test (RLT) wherein they were expected to dress and behave in ways deemed "appropriate" for their true gender in their daily public lives for a pre-determined amount of time. Typically, this period was anywhere from 12-24 months. Only after the completion of the test, and approval from the therapist that the patient would not experience regret or remorse, would patients be given their prescription for Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) or a referral for Gender Affirming Surgery (GAS). Patients were also expected to identify and act as heterosexuals.

However, many patients never received their approval because they were unable to complete their RLT to their therapists' satisfaction. Often, patients never made it through the amount of time allotted by the test. This is often particularly hard for trans women because of the impacts of misogynistic and patriarchal violence and discrimination. In a society which routinely punishes its members for deviance from established norms and traditions, it is supremely difficult to live the life of a woman who is perceived to be a man breaking the boundaries of gender and sexuality. Ciscentric ideology which links the expression of gender to the material reality of biological features indicative of biological sex views the non-treated transgender or transsexual body as an aberration and bequeaths supremacy to the cisgender gaze to determine an individual's adherence to hegemonic visual and audible presentations. Put simply: being

visibly trans in the United States leads to discrimination and undue hardship which makes the ability to successfully "pass" a Real Life Test unbearably difficult, preventing the very medical treatment which would drastically improve the individual's ability to be safe and happy as an accepted member of their true gender.

Medical gatekeeping such as RLT requirements encouraged patients to lie to their therapists about how they felt and, instead, say what they knew the therapist wanted and needed to hear in order to approve their referrals and prescriptions for medical transition. This included lying about their experience during their RLT, as well as hiding any thoughts or feelings that ran counter to hegemonic ideals of gendered behavior. In this scenario, trans women patients fabricated desires to become obedient, doting housewives to dominant cisgender male partners; trans men patients hid moments of weakness, refusing to cry or overtly show emotion during their therapy sessions. Lou Sullivan, the subject of Sean Dorsey's *Uncovered,* gained prominence within the trans community of San Francisco for being the first trans man to gain access to HRT and GAS while openly identifying as gay. Sullivan's story was one of success against all odds because he refused to adhere to the ideals of gender and sexuality that his doctors not only expected but required of him to receive the medical care that he needed.

As such, Hausman's argument that trans people uphold traditional ideals of the gender binary is, while based in fact, entirely superficial. Hausman does not address the complexity of the situation, neglecting to recognize where the motivation to conform to gendered stereotypes comes from for many trans people. Confidently, Hausman supports her hypothesis by using Sandy Stone's "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual

Manifesto," which traces how transsexual autobiography has existed simultaneously as a vital component of trans people's understanding of self and as the scourge of healthcare professionals who seek to establish strict guidelines for medical transition. In this foundational text for the field of trans studies, Stone claims that compiling a corpus of autobiographical materials from other trans people, known colloquially as the "Obligatory Trans File," is a well-documented rite of passage for those who are figuring out their trans identities.

Autobiographical material is particularly coveted because, as Stone points out, "these personal collections are the only source for some of this information [about identity and transition]" (5). Here, Stone acknowledges that the medical industry fails to offer resources to its trans patients, leaving us to search for answers through the personal narratives our forebears leave behind. Patients seeking vaginoplasty or other transition-related treatments "were evaluated on the basis of their *performance* in the gender of their choice" (Stone 10, emphasis original). As a result, trans women would tailor their own autobiographical narratives to fit within those parameters, thereby teaching the very same ideals to those who looked toward their stories for guidance. The cyclical nature of the relationship between healthcare professionals, transsexual women, and the narratives surrounding transsexual experiences further demonstrates the power of the "autobiographical imperative" – institutions exert power and control over personal narratives, even when the subjects write those narratives themselves. But while Stone acknowledges the practical necessity of patients re-affirming normative narratives, she argues in favor of a counter-discourse where trans people acknowledge the full breadth of

their experiences before, during, and after transition, without "constructing a plausible history" behind which we hide in the hopes of being accepted (13).

By a "plausible history," Stone means a history that is palatable to other (non-trans) people, wherein each trans person's story adds up to fulfill not only narratives about ciscentric gender norms but also aligns with the various stereotypes expected of trans people as well. What we, as trans people, face are not only the hegemonic ideals placed upon those of the gender that we know we are (for binary-identified people – for non-binary identified trans people, this process is complicated further) but also hegemonic rhetoric and ideology surrounding trans identity that is rapidly being created as more and more people are becoming aware of and reckoning with our existence daily. These are, of course, entirely intertwined with the ciscentric standards that all people, trans or cis, face regarding their gender expression. For example, gender dysphoria, the name given to the feeling of intense discomfort and distress caused by one's own body because one's biological sex characteristics are not in alignment with those typically associated with one's true gender, has been accepted as a psychiatric diagnosis. In some states in the U.S., a patient seeking transition-related medical treatment must be formally diagnosed with "gender dysphoria" in order to be given approval for HRT or GAS. However, the concept of "gender dysphoria" plays a major part in constructing a plausible history for trans people. While the effects of gender dysphoria are felt by many trans people and is a major leading factor in rates of depression and suicide within the trans community, not all trans people feel uncomfortable with their bodies. Ciscentric ideals of beauty and proper gender expression have created a system wherein trans people

are required to feel shame or disgust at their own bodies in order to be taken seriously by their doctors.

Prosser also speaks at length about the role of the autobiographical within the trans community in relationship to one's journey toward and through medical transition. The psychologist requires the trans patient to tell their story and, in instances where an RLT is required, tell the story of their experiences during their RLT. Even if these narratives are largely fabricated to fit the psychologists' preconceived notions of transness in order to gain access to the medicine they need, the presumption is still that the narrative is autobiographical. Furthermore, taking into account the connection between the autobiography and the notion of "confession," Prosser considers this relationship one that positions the psychologist in the role of an officer of law enforcement, tasked with assessing the truthfulness of the patient's story ("confession") and, subsequently, deciding on whether or not to grant them what they seek. Following through with this metaphor then positions the trans patient in the role of suspected criminal, and the extent to which their doctor believes their autobiographical narrative determines their innocence (truth) or guilt (deception) (Prosser 111).

This dynamic extends far beyond the psychologist's office and is, again, cyclically fueled by and fueling the process of medical gatekeeping. As of March 2020, in all but two U.S. states (California and Illinois), a defendant accused of murder can use what is called the "gay panic defense" to lessen their charges from homicide to self-defense. The premise of the gay panic defense is that the defendant entered into a social or sexual interaction with the victim while perceiving the victim as a member of another

gender. During the interaction, the victim is revealed to be a member of the defendant's own gender, in reaction to which the defendant is compelled to defend themselves. This defense primarily appears in cases where a cis man has murdered another cis man or a trans woman. The gay panic defense not only functions as a means for straight men to defend their own reputations against allegations of homosexuality or "sexual depravity," but, more pertinently for this project, presumes that the victims of these violent crimes are equally as criminal as their murderers for being "deceptive." In this instance, the defendant's autobiographical narrative ("Despite evidence to the contrary in this case, I am not gay") is believed precisely due to the framing of the victim as an autobiographical liar – they were, supposedly, not honest about their background and, therefore, the defendant was "tricked."

The crime of an untruthful autobiographical act has, in these instances, material ramifications for the trans subject, the former (the psychologist's office) equally as dire as the latter (the courtroom). As discussed previously, without access to medical transition, many trans people suffer from dangerous mental health repercussions which can lead to self-harm and suicide; and, as also discussed regarding the "gay panic defense," can lead to dangerous situations from external forces. Focusing on the psychologist's office, Prosser separates this oral autobiographical act from the act of creating the post-transition written autobiography. The former, Prosser claims, is a coercive act, and, again, one that lends itself to untruths. The latter becomes a space for the subject to, in Prosser's terms, fully merge the "I" of the person as they know themselves and the "me" about which they write when recounting their life pre-transition

(122). I posit that economics play a part in this separation as well. In her indictment of the autobiographical imperative, one of the central pillars of Namaste's critique is that the benefactor of the trans subject's storytelling is the curious cisgender audience, not the trans subject. So, who benefits from the trans patient telling their story (or, a version of their story) to their psychologist?

Presumably, one might say that the trans patient is the benefactor, since the autobiographical act (even if it is a lie) is in service to the patient's attempt to access medical care. But in a capitalist society without universal healthcare such as the United States, and the disproportionately high rates of poverty within the trans community in the U.S., it is crucial to consider the flow of money and capital. In the doctor's office, the trans patient has paid, or will pay, money for the doctor's services. Essentially, the trans patient is paying the doctor to evaluate their honesty. If the patient's story is deemed false, or unacceptable within the doctor's diagnostic parameters, the doctor will still be paid. In that case, the trans patient walks away with nothing having been gained, regardless of the truthfulness of their autobiographical act, but with money lost.

As Prosser reminds us, the material realities of being trans include economic (in)security, and this (in)security is directly tied to our access to medical transition, since transness is not a protected identity class in many places in North America. As such, the inability to deliver an acceptable narrative to a psychologist not only leaves the trans subject without the medical treatment that they require, but has also created an imbalanced economic trade, where money has been given for services denied. Hence, medical gatekeeping is part of the cycle of poverty for many trans people; without access

to transition, trans people cannot access gainful employment, which means no regular income and, in the U.S., often, no healthcare, preventing them from continuing to attempt to access medical transition through professionally-legitimated means.

TRANS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CULTURAL PRODUCTION

The autobiographical acts in the courtroom or in the therapist's office mentioned above are examples of how the autobiographical is connected to the trans experience by means of external forces – that is to say, without our explicit consent. These are examples of Prosser's assertion that transsexuals are autobiographers by virtue of being transsexuals because of the ways in which we are forced to perform autobiographical acts in order to survive as trans people in a culture steeped in anti-trans rhetoric and ideology. However, this project centers autobiographical acts that are willingly constructed and enacted by subjects who wish to engage with and publicly present the autobiographical to a witnessing audience.

While the legal and medical autobiographical acts skew to economically disadvantage the trans subject, when a trans subject willfully initiates an autobiographical act within the parameters of a creative contract, the economic exchange shifts in their favor. The witness to the autobiographical act is the audience; and, in many cases, the audience is paying for that very experience of witnessing. This, of course, is a simplified understanding of the process of presenting an artist's work. I will not overlook the reality that, for example, writers must submit their manuscripts for approval and acceptance from publishing companies; or the reality that performance artists must pitch their work

to presenting organizations. Likewise, I am aware that the money paid by audiences to these acts often does not go directly into the pocket of the authors or artists. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, the dynamics of power shift with any exchange of money. A reader pays to read a book and an audience member pays to attend a performance. Regardless of whether the narrative presented by the autobiographical act is "believed" by the audience, the exchange of money for goods and services financially benefits the author/artist in some capacity. This is a distinct change from the doctor's office where the autobiographical act is not only presented for free but at the financial expense of the subject themselves.

In her book *Assuming a Body*, Gayle Salamon challenges the resistance to social construction theory and the theorization of the body divorced from the acknowledgment of lived experience expressed by authors like Prosser and Namaste. In their respective texts, both Prosser and Namaste urge that a preoccupation with abstract notions of gender identity which are often the focus of queer theoretical discourse preclude conversations about the material realities of transness, such as access to gender-affirming healthcare. Namaste specially lambasts the work of "transgender" activists such as Leslie Feinberg for their focus on what Namaste labels as "neo-liberal" efforts of assimilation, such as non-binary gender markers on legal documents, rather than issues that Namaste finds more immediately urgent and impactful, such as income equality. However, in the third chapter, Salamon argues that social construction theory, when utilized correctly, is the exact notion that allows for the fullest understanding and recognition of the validity of trans experiences, both theoretical and embodied. Salamon argues that social construction

theory precisely asks us to consider the context and "historicity" of our experiences. She reminds us that when gender is theorized as a social construction, it should not be dismissed as merely a product of cultural traditions but, rather, understood to be constantly negotiated *within* the boundaries of cultural hegemony.

Salamon's explanation of social construction theory is, in many ways, akin to the image of the ouroboros: the snake eating its own tail, the cycle of identity formation and negotiation in a consistent cycle which seemingly begins, ends, and then begins again – if it ever ends at all. Our genders are constantly being re-imagined by our own selves dependent upon context and circumstances, and that does not make them any less real. Rather, it makes them exceptionally real, because they are products of *both* our internal understandings of ourselves and our understandings of the external factors of our lived experiences. This is also where autobiography and transness align: as Heddon argues, the performance of the autobiographical is equally as much a space where the self is created as it is a space where the self is presented. Since performance is always mediated by its creators, the self that is present in the autobiographical performance is being carefully curated.

In a comprehensive article for *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Andrea Long Chu challenges both Prosser's and Salamon's arguments using Juliet Jacques' autobiographical text *Trans: A Memoir* as a case study. Chu argues that phenomenology "asks how what *does* appear comes to appear in the first place, as well as what that which appears even 'is'" (147, emphasis original). According to Chu, by way of Husserl, Salamon has the ideas of phenomenology "backwards" because she asks phenomenology

to consider the "real" behind what is actually present. In the case of transgender experience, Salamon argues that social constructionism can and should be used in tandem with phenomenology to acknowledge that how a person conceives of their gender identity is equally as important and influential as the way that their identity is read by others. Salamon also advocates for using social constructionism to support gender self-identification by acknowledging the external forces that might have influenced an individual to conceive of their gender in the ways that they do. Salamon urges us to acknowledge these factors and validate them, rather than the common use of social constructionism to discredit trans identity and experience as expressed by trans people themselves ("gender isn't 'real,' therefore feeling 'transgender' isn't 'real,' either"). Chu argues that Husserl's theory to take "the thing itself" is not an impulse to dissect the motivations behind why a body is the way that it is, as Salamon uses it, but rather, to acknowledge the body as it is regardless of its origin or the journey it has taken to get there.

On the other hand, Chu challenges Prosser's theorizing of trans experience by way of phenomenology with an argument that Prosser views medical transition as a definitive goalpost of a linear transsexual journey which seeks "literalization" through turning the physical body into a material manifestation of the felt sense of the body as determined by the individual living under the gaze of institutions and social spheres reinforcing cisnormative ideology. In this understanding of trans experience and phenomenological theory, Prosser imagines the "right" body in the context of the person "trapped in the wrong body" to be an ephemeral future body that will one day be

inhabited. Chu uses Jacques' memoir, which focuses equally on the mundane details of her life as it does on the aspects of her transition, as a challenge to both Prosser and Salamon's ideals about transition and material existence. For Jacques, medical transition is simply one of many means to finding happiness within the world; it is not a finish line that she crosses after which all of her problems, related to transition or otherwise, are resolved. As Jacques herself puts it, "I can have as many operations as I like, David Cameron is still prime minister" (280). What she means here, in relation to Prosser and Salamon, is that her decision to pursue medical transition does not affect the socio-cultural space within which she transitioned and which still affects her. The modes of transition that she pursues only serve to bring an internal sense of comfort, making it easier to navigate a world that this still transphobic, homophobic, racist, classist, and so on. The decisions to transition—the how, why, and when—are the person's own. Attempting to dissect the motivation behind a person's decisions surrounding their own body distracts us from dealing with "the thing itself" – the thing being the person, who is a multi-faceted and fully-developed human living in a complex and complicated world.

As each of the above theorists and thinkers have argued in their own way, our experiences are never without context and never outside of the parameters of social construction. Langellier and Taylor acknowledge that this is especially true within the realm of performance. Additionally, according to Butler's theory of performative gender, due to the socially constructed nature of gender (using the understanding of social construction which acknowledges that gender as a social construct is always being negotiated and formulated by each of us), we are constantly performing our gender, even

when we are alone, without an audience. Gender performativity is persistent even when we are actively performing, in a cultural sense. Butler uses the example of a "transvestite" performing on stage, which, she argues, provokes significantly less anxiety in the audience members at a theater than those sitting beside the same person transgressing norms of gender expression on a bus. The difference, Butler theorizes, is that the person on stage can have the supposed threat of their aberrant gender expression diffused by the context of the performance space – the act is perceived as a deliberately constructed and, more importantly, temporary state of being. The fourth wall, in a sense, acts as the perimeter of a quarantined area, from which the audience can escape when the show is over. Encountering the same kind of performance in an everyday life setting cannot be contained in this way; the gender performance is "real," outside of a context of cultural performance and, hence, is more threatening to the audience's understanding of identity and normality.

But everyone on the bus is still an audience member. We are never not witnessing each other's and our own experiences of gender. Theatrical or dramatized performances of personal narrative do not guarantee or even necessitate change on a congressional or judicial level, but they have the capacity to shed light on the institutions which make that change necessary. Referring back to Hesford's methodology of reading autobiography, when we are able to consider the context of any given autobiographical act, we are able to see the conditions which lead to the story being told – not just the where, when, and why of a person's life events, but the why and how of the storytelling mode and method. What pieces of the story are left out in this venue, and why? What events are highlighted,

and why? What do these inclusions or exclusions spur us, as witnesses, to do in their wake?

TRANS BODIES, TRANS STORIES, AND CHRONONORMATIVITY

In addition to allowing trans people the ability to control the narrative around the stories of our bodies, the process of initiating an autobiographical act and existing as a trans person align in the ways in which these two experiences seem to exist outside of a linear progression of time. The emphasis on repetition (gender performativity, the creation of the self in the re-presenting of the self in a narrative, the rehearsal process of a performance) and the acknowledgement of various bodies across time and space link the trans experience with the performed and the autobiographical. There are myriad ways that trans people reject hegemonic ideas regarding the progression of time, of aging, and of development. Transition, both medical and social, are often theorized as a form of "second puberty" or childhood. Even the notion of transition is one that adopts a traditional Western understanding of time progression, with the presumption that transition is a means to an end, rather than a continuing process. Much like the acknowledgment that queer people do not come out once but are, rather, in a continuous process of coming out, trans people, by virtue of the ways in which our bodies resist notions of capitalist-based productivity, resist normative ideals of time and linear progression.

Essentially, trans people exist in "queer time," as defined by Jack Halberstam in his 2005 text, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives.*

Halberstam defines "queer time" as "those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (6). Halberstam conceives of "queer time" and "queer space" as a necessary intervention into postmodern temporalities and geographies which purport to understand the roots of hegemonic Western linear time in a brutal capitalist system of productivity but fail to acknowledge the ways in which this oppressive structure is more than simply economically stifling, but also distinctly gendered and racialized.

Elizabeth Freeman's 2010 book, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories,* takes the capitalist chronology and defines it as *chrononormativity*. The term refers to, in Freeman's words, "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" (3). To live a life, according to chrononormativity, is to move in a linear fashion through a series of milestones which work in favor of the state's capitalist and imperialist agenda. In combination with Dana Luciano's concept of *chronobiopolitics*, Freeman identifies how expectations of chrononormativity *bind* people together, physically and figuratively, toward a sense of "belonging" – a society defined by the ways in which its people comply with the same circadian person, social, and professional rhythms (4). Curiously, Freeman does not cite Halberstam's 2005 book in her establishment of chrononormativity or her consideration of queer temporalities. However, she also does not devote any time in her text to transsexual subjects and her use of the term "transgender" is that of the wide-reaching umbrella, applied sparingly and only to butch lesbians when it is employed (Freeman 161). Nevertheless, I find the

terminology established in her book useful, and I use it to refer to the hegemonic understanding of time and life progression hereafter. For the remainder of this document, I will use the term "chrononormative" or "chrononormatively" in reference to a linear progression of time.

In Halberstam's establishment of "queer time," he asserts that hegemonic ideals of time are not just situated in relation to the capitalist primacy of economic capital but also lifestyles that fuel capitalist economies. This includes also our understandings of our own processes of growth and aging: "In Western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation; and we create longevity as the most desirable future" (Halberstam 152). Halberstam critiques postmodernist conceptions of chrononormativity for failing to acknowledge the existence of alternative ways of living and measuring time, necessitating Halberstam's defining of queer temporalities. Describing the subcultural lives which rebuke this conceit, Halberstam cites "the transgender person who risks his life by passing in a small town" (10), no doubt referencing Brandon Teena, a subject of most of the text's subsequent analysis.

To this end, I bring this argument to our consideration of processes of transition. To attempt to live in the U.S. as a trans person is risky behavior alone, compounded by the other intersections of your identity – to be a Black trans woman is exponentially more dangerous than to be a white trans man, due to the overwhelmingly oppressive atmosphere created by white supremacist patriarchy. In addition to the risk of simply being trans, cis people often see medical transition as a "risky" behavior because of their

ignorance surrounding the science of transition-related treatment. What they often fail to understand is that the risk of not transitioning is much higher, whether due to gender dysphoria or discrimination or, of course, a combination of both.

Subsequently, I want to consider how queer time creates space for the trans subject who experiences, through medical transition, the physiological adjustments that are tied to pubescence. Chrononormativity assumes and is predicated upon the idea that the body ages and changes in one linear progressive direction, with puberty as a marker of shifting from childhood to adulthood in the period known as adolescence. How do trans subjects pursuing medical transition naturally subvert chrononormativity by virtue of experiencing what is colloquially referred to as a "second puberty?" As previously stated, Prosser notes that transsexual autobiographical acts illuminate the ways that the autobiographical author and the autobiographical subject are two separate beings, theoretically distanced from one another by both time and space as well as the author's and subject's relation to time in regard to their transition. Acknowledging Prosser's argument about trans autobiography, Halberstam's notion of queer time, and Heddon's emphasis on the presence of the performer's body, I argue that each of the performances I analyze in this text, to some degree, engage with the notion of live performance's ephemerality by openly acknowledging the physiological changes that come from aging, exertion, and, in these particular cases, gender transition.

With this understanding of time as situated around medical transition, I want to acknowledge that all the performances included in this dissertation have some degree of emphasis on the subject's process of medical transition. In *Uncovered*, Sullivan's journal

entries speak freely and consistently about his struggle to access medical transition, and the performance even indulges a moment where Dorsey, the only trans dancer in the ensemble, bares his chest to show that he has undergone top surgery. Likewise, while the narrative of Nayfack's *One Woman Show* is not just about her transition, the performance itself served as a fundraiser for her Gender Affirming Surgery, placing the details of her transition front and center. D'Lo's 2019 performance of his solo autobiographical play, titled *To T or Not to T*, revolves around D'Lo's decision to pursue HRT. And while *TRANSom* itself is not a play about transition, in the corresponding chapter, I use my own transition process as a central component of my analysis of the production.

With that said, I want to acknowledge that I do not feel that medical transition is a necessary aspect, or even the most interesting aspect, of being trans. As I will explore in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation, even our subcultural understandings of transition and being trans are linked to ideas of chrononormativity. Transition is often conceived of as a one-time process that has a definitive beginning, middle, and ending. For some trans people, this may be true, particularly for those who view "passing" as a cisgender person of their binary gender in everyday life as the ultimate goal of transition. However, as I argue in my final chapter, these ideals are predicated upon a sense of order and predictability in daily life that is untenable.

However, my focus on performance work which engages with narratives surrounding transition hopes to illuminate how the genre of trans autobiographical performance effectively complicates chrononormative ideals within the trans community. Essentially, what I argue in this dissertation is that the performances examined within it

expose the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of each part of its title: transness, autobiography, and performance.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

The first chapter considers *One Woman Show*, a solo autobiographical musical performance by actress Shakina Nayfack, a transgender woman based in NYC. In *One Woman Show*, Nayfack, who is also the founder and producer of Musical Theater Factory (cheekily abbreviated as MTF), performs a series of original songs in between short anecdotes as she moves chrononormatively through her life. *One Woman Show* served as both the first time Nayfack performed at a venue with the prestige of Joe's Pub, as well as a fundraiser for her GAS (titled "KickstartHer: or, Kickstart My Vagina"). By linking her performance to her transition both narratively and financially, Nayfack makes her attending audience a willing participant in her transition and puts at the forefront of her performance the reality of her lived experience as a trans woman. Additionally, Nayfack's performance rebukes a "plausible history" to explain her transness, instead revealing all of the facets of her identity throughout her life to her audience, from her early years as a gender non-conforming boy to her teen years as a young gay man and then, finally, her adult life as a woman in the theater industry. Furthermore, Nayfack engages the genre of musical theater performance as a way of making space for herself within a field that has not previously made space for trans women. By specifically calling the history and traditions of musical theater into her practice, Nayfack's work illuminates

the absence of trans women within the genre and asserts her right to stake a place within the field despite its boundaries.

The second chapter covers the work of D'Lo, a comedian and actor based in Los Angeles. D'Lo performs both as an actor on film and television, as well as a solo performer and DJ on his own. D'Lo uses solo performance techniques to tell the story of his life as a queer Sri Lankan trans man living in America. D'Lo's work explicitly intertwines the experiences of being a queer trans person of color born to immigrant parents, creating a multi-dimensional commentary on the ways that the body experiences the world within the U.S. To this end, I focus a majority of my analysis on D'Lo's 2019 performance of *To T or Not to T,* presented at the LGBTQ Center in downtown LA. Rather than centering the singular narrative of his transition as a solitary act, D'Lo's performance work highlights the ways in which his story is inextricably woven into the stories of his family, friends, community members, and ancestors. D'Lo engages a number of performance techniques to acknowledge the expansive networks of community within which his processes of self-discovery and transition, including a full drag performance as a character inspired by his mother, a ritual space to call in and acknowledge his ancestors in the space, and a warm invitation to his audience to join him in community before, during, and after his performance.

Continuing my consideration of calling in one's community and ancestors in one's work, the third chapter looks at the work of choreographer Sean Dorsey. *Uncovered* uses the diary entries of Lou Sullivan, a trans activist who fought tirelessly for the rights of trans people, specifically in regard to medical transition and healthcare.

After his death due to AIDS complications in 1991, Sullivan donated his diaries to the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco. Dorsey created *Uncovered* using Sullivan's diary entries, engaging in a fully embodied archival research process of hand-transcribing the entries from their source material, then using a recording of himself reading the entries alongside original musical accompaniment created by local Bay Area trans musicians as the aural backdrop for the dance. Through my performance analysis of *Uncovered*, I explore the ways that Dorsey incorporates his own autobiographical material as well as the autobiographical archive of Sullivan's diaries. I argue that Dorsey engages with concepts of queer time and space through his acknowledging his own past, his past self's imagined future, the past as it is told through Sullivan's writings, and the present liveness of Dorsey's body in the performance space. Additionally, I argue that as a fellow trans man, Dorsey brings Sullivan's story to the performance's audiences without succumbing to the exploitation and dismissive reconfiguring of trans history so often present in narratives when they are controlled by cisgender biographers or cultural producers. Finally, I argue that Dorsey's use of concert dance as a tool for storytelling and trans affirmation is a radical act both in line with the history of modern dance as a genre and pushing against normative notions of acceptable bodies and heteronormativity found within the dance world.

In the final chapter, I examine *TRANSom*, an original devised theater production featuring an all-trans cast that I was involved in creating and performing from August 2018 to August 2019. *TRANSom* was produced by Ground Floor Theater in Austin, TX in collaboration with an ensemble of local trans and non-binary artists and co-directed by

myself and Lisa Scheps, Founder and Artistic Director at Ground Floor Theater. I explain how the production had explicit intentions to avoid the expose-style biographical structure of much existing trans-centric performance and media, instead turning to fictional stories about fictional characters, giving our actors the opportunity to play characters whose experiences resonated with their own without asking them to simply play themselves. However, some audience members and critics assumed an autobiographical aspect of the performance, indicating the presence of what I term an "autobiographical assumption," which I argue is a result of the culture of exploitative visibility which Namaste theorized as the "autobiographical imperative."

Each performance included in this dissertation is unique in their use of particular forms of performance, pulling techniques from various genres and styles, as well as their use of autobiographical material. Some, like Nayfack and D'Lo, tell exclusively their own autobiographical stories; Dorsey includes his autobiographical story in a piece that is largely about someone else's autobiographical material; and *TRANSom,* though it used autobiographical material in its devising process, is deliberately a piece of fiction which was assumed to be autobiographical. However, all of these performances are scripted pieces of live performance that happened in a theater. Hence, I refer to them as works of performance as they all share the qualities of structure and rehearsal.

Likewise, each performance analyzed depicts transitioning bodies: bodies that are transforming moment by moment simultaneously through time, space, and place. If an autobiography is the recounting of a life by the very subject of that life, it is also the recounting of a change or series of changes, regardless of the subject's gender identity.

Against a chrononormative sense of life's progression toward and in service to capitalist goals, perhaps what is also shared between trans autobiographical live performance acts is the explicit acknowledgement of the transitioning body and the transformative potential of the story it tells.

THE POTENTIAL OF PERFORMANCE

In a 2016 conversation with scholar, activist, and archivist Che Gossett, artist Juliana Huxtable discusses the issues of distribution and visibility with regard to visual art and its reliance on the capitalist institutions of museums and private collections. With regard to her own work, she states the following:

> Is the reception or the distribution of that work actually about what I intended it to be? How has the body of work itself been augmented by the desires of collectors, by their desire to sexualize me? To me, writing and performance are really immediate ways to dictate the terms on which I'm establishing my own history. […] I'm the one dictating them; I'm the one who's performing them. […] [For] me, performance and writing feel like very relevant ways to deal with a lot of the questions surrounding trans people or how to represent them in this moment. (Gossett, "Existing," 48-49)

What Huxtable references here is what I wish to emphasize in discussing all of the works in this dissertation with regard to the possibilities of transformation through live storytelling. I have no intention of attempting to argue that any of these works are individual solutions to systemic inequities or state-sanctioned violence. However, where I find that these works establish the potential for transformation is in the claiming of their narratives intrinsically linked to the presentation of their bodies in space.

My experience seeing Sean Dorsey perform for the first time did not simply provide me with positive representation of a trans person. It showed me a trans person

who has taken control of the narrative of his body – by changing it and subsequently presenting it to the public in a way that he himself dictated. As I mentioned previously, and as the many scholars, artists, and activists in this project have stated, theory is a way to help us understand the world and our place in it, but we must be alive and thriving to reap its marginal benefits. These works are evidence of thriving trans life.

Chapter Two: Shakina Nayfack's Works in Progress

In March 2016, the North Carolina legislature introduced House Bill 2, restricting protections for gay and transgender individuals across the state. The passage of the bill brought the national conversation around transgender identity, experience, and rights in the United States sharply into focus due to the portion of the bill which stated that individuals would be required to use the restroom that aligned with their gender assigned at birth, not the gender with which they identify or even the gender listed on their current government documentation. In response to the proposed bill, many corporations pulled their business from the state, including the NBA.[2] Many entertainers also refused to perform within the state, with popular musical artists Bruce Springsteen, Ringo Starr, Pearl Jam, Boston, and Ani DiFranco canceling previously announced tour dates upon the bill's passage.[3] However, some artists, including the inimitable Beyoncé, chose to stay and perform in order to raise awareness for the issue. Some, like indie-folk darlings Mumford and Sons, donated the proceeds for their North Carolina performances to pro-LGBT organizations, committing to material support of the community during this time of fear and uncertainty.

Amongst the media coverage surrounding cisgender celebrities and their decisions to either boycott the state of North Carolina or use their performances as platforms for awareness, New York-based actress, director, and activist Shakina Nayfack approached the issue head-on from the perspective of a person directly affected by the legislation. In

[2] https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/politics-government/article68401147.html

[3] https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2016/05/06/476980045/in-north-carolina-musicians-face-off-against-hb2

June 2016, Nayfack launched a crowdfunding campaign to fund a tour of her "autobiographical rock musical," *Manifest Pussy*, across the state of North Carolina. In addition to touring the show, Nayfack hired a film crew to follow her around and document her performances, as well as the stops that she made along the way. Between performances, Nayfack made an appearance at the North Carolina State Legislature, where she openly used the men's restroom in adherence with the local law, despite the fact that she was, at this time, post-Gender Affirming Surgery. In one of the three short documentary pieces from the tour, Nayfack is shown in the Legislature building, wearing her signature long blonde weave, a yellow dress, and striped heels. She walks up to a security guard and, in front of a group of other visitors and staff members, loudly asks him where she can find the men's bathroom. The camera then follows her down the hall, to the door, and into the bathroom where it frames the bottom of the stall as Nayfack enters and closes the door. Through the space between the door and the floor, we see Shakina's feet in her high-heeled shoes as she uses the toilet.

As discussed in the introduction, one of Viviane Namaste's major critiques of the autobiographical imperative for trans people is the exploitative focus on the private and intimate details of a person's transition, particularly as it pertains to the biological. However, for trans autobiographers and activists alike, this creates a delicate balance regarding what is an exploitative focus on the corporeal aspects of transness versus what is a necessary acknowledgment of the fact that discrimination and violence is inextricably tied to the corporeal. However, as has also been discussed, Namaste rejects an abstracted academic focus on the theoretical, arguing that it distracts from the material realities of

trans experience in the world and detaches discourse around transness from somatic experience. The detachment of theory from the body fuels efforts of activism and liberation which misguidedly focus on policies that advance a neo-liberal agenda of acceptance and tolerance rather than dismantling the foundations of systemic oppression. The challenge this poses to autobiographers is: how can the autobiographical acknowledge the realities of having a trans body without succumbing to the exploitation of the autobiographical imperative?

An answer to that question may lie Nayfack's work. At a moment when cisgender celebrities were debating the most effective use of their platform for allyship, Nayfack used her status as an artist with a platform to place into focus the experience of someone who was directly affected by the issues at hand. She did so with a focus on the material conditions of the law and her somatic experience as somebody whose life was changed by the proposed legislation. Put simply, Nayfack put her transitioning body in focus and on the line to bring attention to something that was only being discussed in the abstract, yet had immediate material consequences.

Nayfack routinely rejects the conceit that to talk about transness means to preclude notions of the corporeal, the somatic, and the erotic. As she states in a 2015 interview with Joe Dziemianowicz for the NY Daily News, when discussing her identity, Nayfack claims "transsexual" as an identifier because "it is for me about sex [...] I don't mean sex like the thing between your legs [...]. But I mean the act of actually being a sexual being." In her solo performance work in particular, Nayfack challenges notions of transness and trans womanhood as sterile or fetishized. She pushes against the

dehumanizing effects of both hypo- and hyper-sexualization by openly claiming the story of her sexuality as it pertains to her transition. This is highlighted further by the method by which Nayfack funded her surgery: a Kickstarter campaign, titled "KickstartHer," which raised over $22,000 for Nayfack's surgery in Thailand. And all three of her solo performance pieces, *One Woman Show* (2013), *Post-Op* (2015), and *Manifest Pussy* (2016), are autobiographical, referencing back to her own journey as a trans woman navigating the tumultuous nature of being trans, a woman, and an artist in the United States.

In this chapter, I focus my discussion on *One Woman Show*, performed for one night only at Joe's Pub in New York City. First, I contextualize Nayfack's work within the history of solo autobiographical performance with an emphasis on its role in second-wave feminism and the groundbreaking usage of the form by pioneering artists of the time. Then, I engage a description and performance analysis based on a YouTube video viewing of the production. Throughout this analysis, I argue that Nayfack utilizes the traditional tools of autobiographical performance and musical theater to create a performance which directly engages and acknowledges her autobiographical artistic work as a key component of her transition. In *One Woman Show*, Shakina Nayfack does not merely use live performance to reflect on her transition but, in fact, relies on live performance in order to continue her transition.

SHAKINA NAYFACK

According to the bio on her website, Nayfack identifies professionally as "a performer, director, writer, producer, and social activist" ("Bio," ShakinaNayfack.NYC). As an advocate for equitable access to and diversity in the performing arts, she is the Founder and Artistic Director of New York-based nonprofit arts organization Musical Theater Factory (MTF). On a page of their website titled "Our Herstory," MTF describes itself as "dedicated to developing musical theatre artists and presenting new work in a collaborative atmosphere free from the pressures of critical or commercial success" (MTF.NYC). The origin story of the organization states that Nayfack was given a lease on a studio used to shoot pornographic films and invited "any volunteer willing to put in sweat equity to build the space" ("Our Herstory," MTF.NYC). MTF was established with an ethos of an "all-access" arts space, where anyone who would like to be involved is welcomed. MTF's current initiatives include Open Share, a space for creators to talk about or present pieces of new work for feedback; Speed Date, which allows artists to find collaborators through 3-minute "dates;" Factory Salons which showcase the work of MTF artists; "4x15," an evening where four new musicals have 15 minutes to perform for a public audience and a panel of professionals; as well as community roundtable discussions for People of Color and Women/Trans Artists.

Nayfack has also had an illustrious career as a television actress in recent years. Her role as Lola on the Hulu series *Difficult People* brought her into the internet spotlight as GIFs featuring her character spouting sarcastic one-liners such as, "Do I have your cisgender permission to be who I am?" began making the rounds on social media. Most

recently, and perhaps most notably, Nayfack was added to the cast of Amazon's *Transparent* for the musical series finale. The show, written by Jill Soloway, focuses on the story of a trans woman named Maura who comes out later on in her life and the impact that her coming out has on her family, including her wife, and her adult children. When it premiered, *Transparent* received highly polarized reactions, including unending praise from many who saw the show as humanizing of its main character, and those (including myself) who chastised it for its choice to cast a cisgender man, actor Jeffrey Tambor, in the lead role as Maura. The show and Tambor came under increased scrutiny as Tambor earned two Emmy awards for his performance as Maura. These incidents added to a harmful history of cisgender actors gaining critical praise and accolades for their roles as transgender characters while these performances actively contribute to the dehumanization and misgendering of trans people.[4]

Despite the controversy over Tambor's casting and award wins, *Transparent* ran for four seasons, during which time it employed a number of trans people as writers, producers, consultants, and performers. The inclusion of trans people behind and in front of the camera complicated the discussion, as there was a strong case to be made regarding the fact that the show, while using its star power to gain mainstream interest, offered employment opportunities for trans people in the industry. However, the show came under heavy scrutiny in late 2017, when allegations of sexual harassment were made against Tambor by a number of the women who worked on the show. As a result,

[4] I touch on this subject in-depth in my 2016 Master's thesis, "The Spectacle of Transformation: (Re)Presenting Transgender Identity and Experience in Performance"

Soloway re-wrote the script for the final season in order to write Tambor out -- which also necessitated writing Maura out. In the wake of the controversy, the show closed on an extended musical episode for its series finale, and Nayfack was brought in to play a central part. At first taking on the role of a seemingly incidental character, a weed dealer who makes a house call to Maura's adult daughter, Nayfack then takes on the role of Maura in a play-within-the-show written and directed by Maura's wife, Shelly (played by Judith Light).

Nayfack was also recently cast in a re-release of the well-known Japanese animation film, *Tokyo Godfathers*, directed by Satoshi Kon. The film follows three homeless people who come across an abandoned baby and seek to find the child's biological family. One of the characters, Hana, is described as a drag queen but presents as a woman throughout the entire film. Previous voiceover work for the film, in both Japanese and English, has cast a man to voice Hana. For the 2020 re-release, Nayfack was chosen to voice the role, making it the first time a trans woman has voiced this character who is clearly intended to be a trans woman.

Both her roles in *Transparent* and *Tokyo Godfathers* show that Nayfack is gaining a reputation in the industry as a trans actress who can take on roles which attempt to repair past transphobic casting choices. In respect to queer time, I find it pertinent to look at where Nayfack's career is now as my analysis looks back at a performance from nearly 7 years ago. In *One Woman Show*, Nayfack sings about her dreams of being a leading actress on Broadway. To view her work now, with her major roles in TV and film,

provides us with a dramatic irony as audience members who know what the future holds for her.

SOLO PERFORMANCE, FEMINISM, & BIOLOGICAL ESSENTIALISM

To establish the foundation upon which Nayfack engages her autobiographical performance, we will look to the past. In her 2008 book *Autobiography and Performance*, Deirdre Heddon traces U.S.-based autobiographical performance's roots to feminist performance art of the 1970's. The advent of autobiography as a powerful political outlet for women coincided with second-wave feminism's assertion that "the personal is political." Published autobiography contributed to early feminism's ambitions to break down the walls between the private and the public sphere; barriers which had previously been erected and maintained to relegate women to the domestic realm and out of the social and political world. Performance-based autobiography takes these aims a step further with the addition of the immediacy of liveness. While written autobiography brings a woman's story into the public eye, Heddon foregrounds the physical presence of the performer as one of the key aspects of performed autobiography. This was especially true for second-wave feminists who expanded previous feminist aims of bringing women into the public sphere to explicitly include the public acknowledgement of a woman's body and her agency over it. Citing performances like Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*, Heddon highlights how the performance of autobiographical material was a way for (white, cisgender) women to tell their stories and intrinsically tie their stories to their corporeal forms.

However, Heddon also acknowledges the essentializing nature of autobiographical work, that for one subject to speak as a member of a group is often misconstrued as one subject representing or speaking for an entire group of people. She traces the trajectory of second-wave feminist art as it recognized that the majority of the work and artists producing work were members of a homogenous subset of women: white, cisgender, and often straight. There is one performance in her text by a performer who Heddon identifies as "transgender," though the self-identification of this person as transgender is unknown. Furthermore, there are no mentions in Heddon's book, or in any of the books that Heddon references, to autobiographical performance work by trans women.

As evidenced by Schneemann's work, feminist art and activism in these circles was vastly vagino-centric. The pushing of the private world into the public world also extended to and highlighted the "private" parts of the body. One need only think of the stereotype of American women in the 1970s hosting parties in their living rooms with drinks, hors d'oeuvres, and hand mirrors to look at their own and each other's genitals. *Interior Scroll* was first performed in 1975. Four years later, Janice Raymond published *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, a notoriously transmisogynistic text which has caused immeasurable harm to the trans community. Raymond's text has been as a foundational text for Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism, a splinter group from mainstream feminism which is predicated upon denying trans women the validity of their identity on the basis of their biology. In *The Transsexual Empire,* Raymond claimed that trans women are men who infiltrate womanhood in order to re-inscribe traditional

gender roles. Raymond's text focuses particularly on the role that medical transition plays in this process, claiming that, by allowing trans women to access medical transition, the medical industry is directly responsible for reducing the experience of womanhood to the possession of particular genitals rather than the social and emotional experience of being a woman.

I do not aim to assert or even suggest that Raymond and Schneemann explicitly aligned themselves ideologically or politically. However, both pieces of work (*Interior Scroll* and *The Transsexual Empire*) demonstrate the deep and insidious permeation of biological essentialism during the time period where Heddon places a major movement of autobiographical performance. Arguably one of Scheneemann's most notable works, *Interior Scroll* depicts the artist entering a room, covering herself in mud, then pulling from her vagina a scroll of paper upon which is printed a personal response to a male art critic who derisively defined her work as "messy" and "female." Schneemann explained the work in her own words by describing the significance she found in the vagina as a symbol: "as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, the source of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation [and a] source of interior knowledge" ("Interior Scroll," CaroleeSchneemannn.com). With this artistic statement, Schneemann suggests that her autobiographical material specifically originates from inside of her vaginal canal.

The piece is also borderline satirical, with Schneemann slathering mud on her body and the vaginal extraction of her response to the critic's comments ("messy" and "female"). The mud makes Schneemann literally "messy," and her vagina makes her

literally “female.” Additionally, pulling her response from her vagina not only represents her assertion that “interior knowledge” is stored in & accessed via her vaginal canal, but also suggests a penetration of the original critique by the male author. Here, figuratively, genitalia is separated on a binary and in direct, almost violent opposition to one another, in line with Raymond’s argument that vaginoplasty is a procedure which removes a tool of misogynistic violence (the penis) from an inherently misogynistic & violent person (a “man”).

I bring this up with the intention of discussing Shakina Nayfack’s work through the lens of a woman engaging in and contributing to the legacy of women’s autobiographical performance. While Nayfack’s story is a trans narrative, it is also a woman’s narrative, and, specifically, a trans woman’s narrative. Additionally, since the performance contributed to the fundraiser for Nayfack’s vaginoplasty, Nayfack follows in the footsteps of performers like Schneemann for whom the vagina was a central subject of the work. However, Nayfack’s relationship to genitalia and gender identity differs from that of a cis woman like Schneemann, and it is clearly in opposition to Raymond’s divisive and violent assertions about transsexual women and medical transition.

TIME IS/AND MONEY

In fact, one could argue that Nayfack’s relationship to biology, and to the work she has had to do to in service to her relationship to her body, aligns perfectly with Schneemann’s assertions about the power of the vagina. In the middle of *One Woman Show*, Nayfack refers to the performance as “a dream deferred.” She explains wanting to

have a performance like this, where she is able to sing and celebrate herself in front of a room of loving friends and supporters, and by announcing this wish, the audience becomes a part of Nayfack's autobiographical tale. In future iterations of the performance, or in future autobiographical works, Nayfack will be able to reference this performance as the realization of her dream. Additionally, the performance served not only as the realization of an artistic goal but also played a key role in Nayfack's medical transition. At the time of the performance, Nayfack launched a crowdfunding campaign on the website YouCaring.org titled, "KickStartHer." The title is a pun using the name of the popular crowdfunding site Kickstarter, with the "Her" in the title referencing Nayfack herself and, ostensibly, the vagina that she was raising money to construct through vaginoplasty surgery. Nayfack used the campaign to successfully raise $25,000 to fund travel, lodging, and surgery in Thailand.

One Woman Show was intended as a fundraiser in conjunction with the online campaign wherein ticket sales contributed directly to the funds for Nayfack's transition-related healthcare. As such, for all the ways that Nayfack's presentation of her autobiographical narrative focuses on those intimate details that might, from another vantage point, be interpreted as exploitative or invasive, Nayfack uses her narrative as a means of survival and support. The price to show up and hear Nayfack sing about her life as a trans woman is to put money directly into her pocket to be used to fund her transition. In a way, the message sent is that if you are going to stick your nose in her business, at the very least you need to pay to maintain the business.

In addition to using the performance as a means of financial security for her transition, I argue that by making ticket sales for the show donations to the campaign, Nayfack includes the audience in her autobiographical narrative. If autobiographical narratives about trans people include aspects of transition, whether those are exploitative and invasive or consensually informative, then by virtue of being involved in the fundraising efforts for Nayfack's surgery, the audience at the show is a part of that narrative. When Nayfack says that the show is "a dream deferred," she makes clear that she is also referencing her (future) vagina. Here, Nayfack also breaks the boundaries of autobiographical time in that she is presenting her narrative in the midst of her personal journey, not at the end of it. The audience of *One Woman Show* witnesses Nayfack in the middle of attempting to fund her surgery. At the moment of performance, not only has the surgery not yet happened, but the surgery is in a state of possibly not happening if the funding goal is not reached. In this way, the live performance is somewhat of a liminal space, existing between the initial pursuit of the dream and the dream coming true.

In an article for *New Media and Society*, Megan Farnel discusses the phenomenon of trans people crowdfunding aspects of their medical transition through the lenses of publics and affect theory. Farnel argues that the people who contribute money to these campaigns, known as "backers," constitute a group of people which "play a dynamic role that cannot be neatly distinguished either from the overtly political force of a public or from the consumptive position of audiences" (2). Part of parsing out her argument here also requires that Farnel address the ways that the trans body in particular is situated within these campaigns and, specifically, in relation to their backers. Farnel uses Nayfack

as one of her case studies and her analysis focuses on the ways that Nayfack blurs the boundaries between the categories of her backers and each platform. Nayfack's "KickStartHer" campaign is, as mentioned, a play-on-words with Kickstarter, the popular crowdfunding website primarily used for creative projects and early market start-up products. However, Nayfack's campaign was hosted on YouCaring.org, a now defunct website which was created specifically for healthcare-related charity, although it featured videos of Nayfack singing songs from *One Woman Show*.

Farnel is fascinated by Nayfack's presentation of her performance work despite the fact that the campaign hosting site she chose is one which does not require that its fundraisers reward their backers with a product or final presentation. She argues that Nayfack's inclusion of this material is "a pre-emptive response to accusations that she is using crowdfunding for personal matters in an inappropriate way" (11), suggesting that the video clips from *One Woman Show* are intended to stand-in for backer rewards as an assurance to potential donors that their money is going toward "the normalization of trans bodies through alignment with a capitalist ethos" (12). In other words, Farnel suggests that Nayfack only features her professional repertoire as a way to advocate for her value as a generator of creative content and, subsequently, a cause that is worthy of donations. Farnel places Nayfack's campaign in direct comparison to a Kickstarter campaign by filmmaker Ashley Altadonna titled "Making the Cut," which raised funds for Altadonna to hire a film crew to document her own journey of pursuing transitional surgery. Altadonna's campaign did not raise funds directly for her surgery but, rather, for the creation of the documentary about her fundraising and surgery, which is where Farnel

finds its revolutionary potential; she argues that Altadonna uses her platform to raise awareness of the social and economic difficulties that trans people face when pursuing medical transition, whereas Nayfack's campaign focuses on the "individual" in a capitalist context.

According to Farnel, Altadonna creates a crowd that has "a willingness to be affected by trans* bodies and narratives" (7) by the inclusion of voices and perspectives other than her own in the film about her own transition. Essentially, Farnel argues that Altadonna uses her campaign to force her backers to consider the multitudes of trans experiences and give their money to support the dissemination of that knowledge, while Nayfack's campaign asks backers to donate money so that she can continue to make art that is focused on her own self. Farnel clearly sees the former as a much more admirable act than the latter. What Farnel fails to consider in her analysis is the fact that Nayfack's live performance audience were also her backers. The "willingness to be affected" that Farnel argues Altadonna creates in her audiences is also clearly present in Nayfack's backers because they contribute not only to Nayfack's professional financial success but her personal goals of transition as well. In addition, what Farnel misses in her analysis is that Altadonna's work and Nayfack's work are not dissimilar. As I argued above, *One Woman Show* is the live documentation of a transition in progress.

Viewing the performance as I did, via video recording three years after its premiere, I was outside of that liminal moment because I knew that the fundraiser had succeeded, that Nayfack had undergone surgery and recovered, and that she had a second performance aptly titled *Post-Op* (2015). Therefore, my perception of the performance is

that of someone who can see the other side of the dream, and this context certainly influences my readings of the performance. In a way, my analysis of the production exists on its own outside of the realm of chrononormativity because I know the future as I watch Nayfack perform the story of her past in a present moment where the future has yet to be determined. What I cannot discern from my vantage point as a spectator is the energy of the performance in the moment of liveness, what it felt like in that moment of uncertainty for Nayfack's future, and what may have prevailed through that uncertainty into what D. Soyini Madison calls the "performance of possibilities" wherein an audience and performer work in tandem to "break through unfair closures, remake the possibility for new openings, and bring the margins to a shared center" (196). Essentially, by being live in the room with Nayfack for her performance of her story, the live witnesses to her performance were actively engaged in her own re-presentation of her self and, thereby, their own understanding of her self as well.

One Woman Show: A Broadway Dream Deferred

Nayfack performed *One Woman Show* at Joe's Pub in December 2013. With music written for Nayfack by a collection of musician friends and allies, the evening is an autobiographical tale wrapped in a musical revue. Nayfack herself describes it on her website as the first of three "autobiographical rock musicals." *One Woman Show* brings Nayfack's life story to the stage through a series of original songs interspersed with performed narratives bringing the audience chronologically through her life. The format follows a traditional musical theater structure wherein the opening number is a song that

introduces us to the main character and the themes of the show as they will unfold in more intricate detail as the evening goes on ("Chick with a Schtick"). The songs then act as bridges between narrative moments ("I Want to Wear You," "Broadway Medley," until a final song that ties the themes together with a look toward the future ("Broadway, Here I Come") and an epilogue that is more broadly applicable ("Prayer of Saint Francis").

At the top of *One Woman Show*, the audience cheers wildly as the lights come up on Nayfack standing center stage under a beaming spotlight. The light reflects brightly off the shiny layer of lip gloss on her broadly smiling lips, the thick golden hoops dangling heavily from her ears, and the smooth skin of her clean-shaven bald scalp. As the pianist tickles a dainty chord, Nayfack stretches her arms out to either side and strikes a pose with a delicate flourish of her wrist, her chin lifted high as she begins to sing:

> The boy you knew /
> Is saying his goodbyes /
> Letting go of who he was /
> And what's between his thighs.

The piano rumbles in its lower register, the tune turning sultry before Nayfack pumps her fist in the air and the full band launches into an upbeat, pop-inspired ballad. The song, titled "Chick with a Schtick" after its choral refrain, tells a tale of Nayfack being read as a trans woman by strangers who pass her on the street. As she sings "They think they see / Just another chick with a shtick," she references many facets of her identity: not just her

identity as a trans woman, but also her identity as a Jewish trans woman attempting to make a career in the entertainment industry. Her "schtick" is, at once, the gimmicks employed in her performances, an acknowledgement of her Jewishness, and her penis. "Chick with a Schtick" also establishes the form and content for the evening's performance, which will be a musical revue of Nayfack's life as a self-proclaimed "transgender performance artist and safe sex educator."

On the surface, Nayfack's performance seems to play directly into the conventions of the autobiographical imperative. Nayfack opens her show with a song about (amongst other things) the nature of her genitals. Toward the end of the song, a back-up singer hands Nayfack a long cylindrical percussion shaker, which Nayfack gleefully wags at the apex of her thighs to the rhythm of the song. As the song reaches its ending crescendo, the silver rod shakes fervently as Nayfack sings about being "thankfully one damn lucky chick with a schtick." However, while the content focuses on the biological, every aspect of performance is presented in service to Nayfack's telling of her own story on her own terms. Each song was written by Nayfack and her musical collaborators, inspired by the anecdotes from Nayfack's life which she delivers between musical numbers.

In the introduction to her book *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*, scholar Stacy Wolf performs a lesbian feminist reading of the leading ladies from Broadway's Golden Age. According to Wolf, these actresses solidified their presence as "an enduring part of American culture [...] their names are well known to many, their faces iconic, and their voices immediately recognizable" (5).

Through Wolf's lesbian feminist lens, she argues that these women are "visually and aurally dominant [...] center stage, the story is built around her, and the songs are written for her as solo presentations" (22). For the evening of *One Woman Show*, Nayfack certainly fits this bill as a leading lady. Rather than being exploited by a cisgender journalist or film director, the intimate details of her personal life become the elements molded to support Nayfack's stardom.

In fact, the cisgender people who join Nayfack on the stage exist solely to supplement Nayfack's storytelling. When Nayfack delivers her monologues between songs, the lights are solely focused on her. The only other bodies on stage which catch the spotlight are the neck of the guitar and the belly of the double bass – all simply tools in service to Nayfack and her story as she tells it. Additionally, the centralization of Nayfack's trans-ness creates exciting moments of joyful gender play with the cis accompanists, such as when her three back-up singers (Mary Kate Morrissey, Natalie Wachen, and Amanda Savan) join her in perfect harmony to sing the words "just another chick with a schtick." The sight of the three women, smiling wide and swaying in unison behind Nayfack as they sing together about being an actress with a penis, is one of the delightful moments of "ritual dance, drag, and gender bending showtunes" ("One Woman Show," Playbill.com) that the performance promises in its advertising material.

After the applause subsides following "Chick with a Schtick," Nayfack raises her arms above her head and proclaims, "Thank you for coming out tonight to Kickstart My Vagina!" Clever wordplay aside, Nayfack adds an additional layer to the role played by the performance's audience. Not only are they witnesses to her performance, but also

supporters of her transition process. While Nayfack is certainly providing her audience with details of her transition, she does so in exchange for something toward her benefit as well. The divulgence of her story is reciprocal with her audience, not exploitative at her expense for their gain. And there is no interviewer to mediate between Nayfack and her audience, no Maury Povich to direct the audience's attention to the parts of Nayfack that seem the most scandalous – she is in control of the gaze. If there is any focus on Nayfack's genitals, it is because she brought it up first when she asked them to pay for her vagina in order to gain access to the performance.

In *One Woman Show*, Nayfack is explicit about her past experiences with her shifting gender identity and expression. The narrative progresses through Nayfack's life, from trying on a dress for the first time as a child, to grappling with gay male identity in Catholic school during the AIDS crisis. Nayfack explains that, once she reached puberty, she misunderstood her feelings of trans-ness for a gay male identity because she had no point of reference for trans womanhood. However, the only references to gay identity that she found in the media were, she explains, "these men on TV with purple splotches all over their faces, wasting away, dying of AIDS." Nayfack then pulls a piece of paper out from the under collar of her dress and reads the jacket description for a book she once took from her school's library, titled We Have AIDS: "Nine young people tell their depressing stories […] All expect to die […] Between each devastating chapter are some facts about AIDS." What Nayfack brings to the forefront in this moment is not just a personal anecdote but a commentary on a cultural phenomenon directly tied to the structures of oppression Namaste links to the autobiographical imperative. Media

representation feeds directly into institutional efforts to stifle expressions of identity outside of acceptable hegemonic discourse. The ubiquity of queer devastation centers the cultural narrative of queerness around death, suffering, and sadness. Ultimately, this leads to rhetoric suggesting that queerness, when realized in the body, has consequences.

In the introduction to their book *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance*, Holly Hughes and David Román offer the performance genre of queer solo autobiography as an antidote to this proliferating cultural dirge. Queer people taking the stage to tell their own, or their peers', stories is "often part of a larger collective and ongoing process of revisionist history" steeped in gay and lesbian identity politics and activism, which have "a certain political investment in visibility" (4). Hughes and Román imagine queer solo performance and autobiography as resistant to the projects of marginalization and assimilation perpetrated during moments in U.S. history such as the AIDS crisis and the culture wars of the late 80s/early 90s. These performances present lives that are "dynamic and contingent [...] [and] trouble the comfort of community even as they invest in it" (5). In other words, queer autobiographical solo performance claims the history of a community that has been and continues to be lost to disease and oppression, while also rejecting the homogenization of that community which panders to and proliferates ideals of capitalist patriarchal Eurocentric discourse. Consequently, Hughes and Roman's theorization of this genre aligns with Namaste's call to center the marginalized and Stone's vision of a polyvocal narrative which acknowledges the intricacies of trans identity beyond binaries, all of which Nayfack deftly addresses through her own solo autobiographical narrative.

One of the show's darker moments depicts the teenage Nayfack placed into solitary confinement at a juvenile mental health care facility after a failed attempt at suicide. Nayfack details the memory for the audience through prose and describes how she would sing songs from her favorite musicals to keep herself company while strapped down in five-point restraints. Then, in stark contrast to the somber tone of the preceding monologue, Nayfack and the band burst into the peppy "Jacob and Sons" from Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat. Seamlessly, the music and Nayfack's voice transition into the sultry "Turn Back, O Man" from Godspell, which then morphs into the melancholy "Maybe This Time" from Cabaret, during which Nayfack slips into the slurring cadence of a young Liza Minelli. Nayfack's medley continues with songs from other popular musicals (RENT, Phantom of the Opera, Gypsy, to name a few) ending with a song originally written for and performed by Barbra Streisand. With the veins and tendons bulging from her neck, Nayfack works her lungs and throat to their fullest ability as she relives this traumatic memory through a contextualized cathartic release. Under the spotlight, face turning red and sweat trickling over her cheeks, Nayfack simultaneously embodies the iconography of Broadway femininity (Liza Minnelli as Sally Bowles, Ethel Merman or Bernadette Peters or Patti Lupone as Mama Rose, Barbra Streisand as herself) and the vivid memory of her younger self, a gay teenage boy criminalized for acting out against authority. This multi-layered presentation of gender simulacrum brings with it into the spotlight the performative nature of gender expression, repeated and reiterated over time.

Scholar Zaren Healey White argues that transgender performance artists who highlight the performativity and artifice of gender expression in their artwork "include not only the performance of a [female/male] identity, but the performance of a trans [woman/man] identity and embodiment—something that occupies its own conceptual space" (177). Drawing upon Judith Butler's work regarding the nature of butch/femme identity and gender roles within lesbian communities, White asserts that gender expression as it manifests by and within trans people are "not [copies] of the 'original' […] but copies of a copy" (175). In naming this out, White acknowledges that gender expression is as performative for cisgender people as it is for trans people. Therefore, trans people's gender expressions, much like anyone else's, are unique and their own to claim – not, as theorists like Hausman argue, simply "enforcing cultural laws on the body's physiology" (Hausman 357).

For White, trans performance artists who take as their subject their gender expression assert "the value of communicating and sharing the transgender quest" (182). This is in line with Stone's call to "generate a true, effective and representational counterdiscourse […] from outside the boundaries of gender, beyond the constructed oppositional nodes which have been predefined as the only positions from which discourse is possible" (13). Essentially, the liberatory possibilities for trans autobiographical performance lie in the trans performer's open acknowledgement of their trans-ness, an act which does not preclude but, rather, directly references one's experiences and experiments in gender expression. As previously stated, Nayfack makes no attempt to hide behind a "plausible history" of acceptable cis-centric womanhood. Her

experiences as a gay teenage boy are not secrets to hide, and by acknowledging her past, Nayfack also acknowledges how the media and the healthcare industry, so often trusted as sources of authority, failed her even before she embraced her trans-ness.

Stone's call for "authentic experience" from trans narratives, and how Nayfack answers that call, work to illuminate the very oppressions that the autobiographical imperative precludes. Nayfack's performance centers the lived realities of a trans woman in an industry which produces and replicates ideals of gender, sexuality, and embodiment. Through this performance, Nayfack claims her place on the stage without compromising her complex history as a multi-faceted transgender human being. Leading into the final song of the evening, Nayfack speaks of how she imagines herself falling onto the tracks of the subway after experiencing constant street harassment and wonders if anyone would try to help her up. "It's exhausting to be vigilant, to keep my heart open in spite of voices that might tell me otherwise," she says, "but if that's what it takes to come into the world as I was meant to be, you know, bring it. I'm ready. Bracing for impact and embracing it." The song that follows a show-stopping, emotional show of theatrical prowess from a pre-operative trans woman as she stakes her claim on the stage and, subsequently, in the world.

ONE WOMAN SHOW: STAGING TRAUMA

Additionally, acknowledging Nayfack's authentic experiences also indicts the institutional powers which subjugated her not only as a trans woman, but as a young man rebuking gender and sexual expectations. By claiming the stage and singing her story,

Nayfack repurposes a space and a genre for a class of people who have yet to be given access to it on an institutional scale. As such, Nayfack takes her trans-ness, to quote the chapter title in which Namaste establishes the autobiographical imperative, "beyond image content" – beyond discussions of who is seen, into discussions of how one is seen and on whose terms. Through Nayfack's careful manipulation of her genre, content, and performative elements, *One Woman Show* acts as a model for seizing the terms of representation without compromising the depth and breadth of one's own story.

Further, while she frankly discusses her experiences of prejudice and trauma, Nayfack's performance does not focus on the tragedy of being trans. The key to Nayfack's depiction of the hardships she faced (and faces) for being trans is the location of the trauma's source. Nayfack does not describe the turmoil of dysphoria, but rather, the experiences of bigotry she faced from external sources of authority. In short, Nayfack acknowledges that it is not a tragedy to be trans, but rather, the environment within which trans people live makes life difficult for trans people. In "Wear You," Nayfack describes the first time that she ever wore a dress: at a Superbowl party, where the other little girls are given a box of dresses to play with while the adults watch the game. Nayfack tells the tale with longing in her voice and her eyes, focused on the horizon behind the audience as she sings about her mother warning her against joining in with the girls:

> And she tries to yell, "No!" in that silent Mom voice /
>
> My eyes try to tell her, "I have no choice" /
>
> And little girls dress up like little girls do /
>
> Like I want to

There is no shame or denial of self in Nayfack's lyrics as she sings of her younger self. Instead, there is an open acknowledgement that what Nayfack knows to be true and right for herself is denied her by authoritarian forces (in this case, her parents).

Ultimately, the song is a love ballad from a young trans girl to the dress she longs to wear. Nayfack evokes an almost Romeo and Juliet dynamic between her younger self and the dress, personifying it through the lyrics as she sings directly to the garment:

I want to wear you, pull you over my head /

I want to wear you all day long, then to bed /

Push you down past my hips /

Smooth you down with my fingertips /

I want to wear you

Here, Nayfack addresses the somatic experience of wearing the dress. For young (Jared Allen) Nayfack, wearing the dress is not just about confirming a gender identity or expression but also about experiencing the physical sensation of wearing one. What audience members also experience is (Shakina) Nayfack in the moment of performance wearing a dress for her performance. The dream that is sung about in the song is realized in the moment of singing the song.

Here, liveness and the body provide an integral moment that eludes the experience of a written autobiography. The audience is presented with a story of a young person's desire which they then get to witness the older version of that person realize in real time. In the same way that I watch the performance after Nayfack's surgery fundraiser and know that she will prevail, meet her goal and have her surgery, so too does

the audience in that live moment hear the song about Jared wanting to wear the dress and Shakina, his older self, not only getting to wear the dress but wearing it on stage in front of a paying audience. The audience's experience of Jared's anguish is, in some ways, relieved because they already know the outcome. The mother who silently tells Jared not to wear the dress, who makes him feel ashamed to do so, becomes the vanquished antagonist. Nayfack's singing of the final version of the chorus, replacing "I wanna wear you" with "I'm *gonna* wear you" while doing exactly that (wearing a dress) is more than a rallying cry against shame – it is a celebration.

Nayfack's explorations of discrimination and systemic oppression are spread throughout the entire show. She recounts how, when she identified as a young gay boy, she was unable to find positive representations of gay men in the literature and media that was available to her. The only depictions she could find was a book at her local library detailing the ways that AIDS ravages the body. She reads the blurb from the book jacket, which describes the grotesque imagery accompanying stories of tragedy that served as gay representation for her as a child. Nayfack explains in great detail the ways that both the public secular, private religious, and private arts-centric school systems failed her on multiple levels for being a queer child. This leads Nayfack to being institutionalized as a teenager, an experience which clearly inflicted an enormous amount of trauma upon her. However, once again, her acknowledgment of her trauma is not the trauma of being gay or being trans; never once does Nayfack describe any self-loathing or inwardly focused ire toward her sexuality or gender. Instead, Nayfack is very clear that the negative repercussions of being queer stem from external forces.

In her 2003 book *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich focuses on the affective aspects of trauma. Moving away from understanding trauma as a merely internal and psychologically-experienced set of events, Cvetkovich locates certain traumas within larger oppressive systems. In doing so, Cvetkovich also challenges the medicalization of trauma and pathologizing of conditions such as PTSD. Cvetkovich uses as an example the prevailing diagnoses of PTSD in war veterans, arguing that while she is not advocating against treatment for the condition, focusing on the individual pulls attention away from the larger issue, which is the U.S.'s military-industrial complex and violent imperialism. Cvetkovich advises that "it is wise to remain vigilant about the hazards of converting a social problem into a medical one" (45).

Perhaps not conversely, but additionally, Cvetkovich addresses the pathologizing of gay and lesbian identity. The relationship between the queer community and the medical industry has a history of complication, as has been discussed in earlier parts of this document. Cvetkovich identifies the ways in which medicalization of homosexual behavior and identity exist cyclically, recognizing that the naming of "homosexuality" as a medical condition that necessitated treatment was a decision that ultimately became integral to the creation of the queer community, beginning in the Victorian era and extending to the present. I will also include in this conversation the additional layer of criminalization, as connected to medicalization. Not only has homosexuality been pathologized as a medical condition in need of a cure, but it has also been criminalized as law-breaking behavior that needs to be curbed and punished, and these two phenomena are not unrelated. Cvetkovich hints at this when she refers to queer pathologization as an

"oppressive" force, but I feel that it needs to be named outright. Both medicalization and criminalization lead to the creation of queer subcultures and counterpublics, which, in tandem, shape and affect the experiences of queer people. In short, Cvetkovich argues that standing in opposition to the pathologization of queerness should not necessitate the exclusion of medicalization (and, I add, criminalization) in our understanding of how these identities and subgroups understand their experiences and their members' own selves. In this regard, Cvetkovich claims that by doing so, we may "[understand] traumatic feelings not as medical problems in search of a cure but as felt experiences that can be mobilized in a range of directions, including the construction of cultures and publics" (47).

The history of pathology, medicalization, and criminalization is equally as intertwined for trans people. In her discussion of the autobiographical imperative, Namaste indicts the contemporary queer rights movement and queer theorists for what Namaste identifies as a willful ignorance of the realities faced by transsexuals. Here, Namaste engages in subgroup classification influenced by medicalization, as discussed by Cvetkovich. "Transsexuals," in Namastes' book, are a separate group from those who classify themselves under the "transgender" umbrella, with medical transition acting as the barrier between the two groups. Namaste rebukes the efforts of activists like Leslie Feinberg to de-pathologize trans identity, arguing that the move away from medical diagnosis leads to increased barriers in accessing medical transition because of the structure of the current healthcare system in Canada and the U.S.

Even with a medical diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder, it can be difficult to convince insurance companies to cover the costs of medical transition, whether one is pursuing HRT or GAS or other procedures like facial feminization surgery or electrolysis for hair removal. Nayfack brings these struggles to the forefront in her performance by making *One Woman Show* a part of the fundraiser for her surgery. The fact that Nayfack needs to hold a fundraiser at all indicates that there are major gaps in the healthcare system, along with the fact that she chooses to fly to Thailand to have her surgery done because the technology and methodology is more advanced than it is anywhere in North America. It also illuminates the struggles for healthcare faced by artists in the U.S., who are often left without insurance coverage at all because they do not have a full-time employer through which they can access coverage.

Furthermore, the push for de-pathologization does not necessarily lead to a path toward de-criminalization. In fact, Namaste argues, since medical transition is often the path toward being able to pass as cis and, therefore, live more safely and securely, the movement to de-pathologize can lead to an increased level of criminalization. Being trans without access to medical transition often leads to unemployment and homelessness due to anti-trans discrimination, leading trans individuals to live on the streets and turn to illegal forms of work in order to live. The cycle perpetuates and the costs of medical transition become increasingly more staggering and unmanageable.

In this way, the trans experience resonates with Cvetkovich's previously referenced affect theory around trauma. The trans experience in the U.S. is highly shaped by trauma, which is caused and informed by systems in place which oppress on the basis

of not just gender and sex, but also sexuality, race, class, and ability. The push to de-pathologize is deeply steeped in ableist stigma against mental illness, which is embedded in capitalist constructions of productivity and obedience. The push to remove GID from the DSM is to contest the presumption that being transgender is, itself, a mental illness in need of a cure. Similar to the push Cvetkovich makes to de-medicalize PTSD, the intention is to view transness as not an individual condition to be solved by medication. But this is a false equivalence of GID with transness itself, and Namaste makes this argument, albeit subtly. By medicalizing GID, medical transition can be seen as a treatment for the symptoms of the disorder, which manifest in symptoms of gender dysphoria leading to depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.

But again, as Cvetkovich reminds us, there is a culture within which these symptoms manifest. A culture within which children are raised to become adults who exhibit particular traits in relationship to their gender, which is assigned to them at the moment of their birth based on their sex characteristics, is one in which children and adults who understand their gender identity as different than that which is assigned will struggle. Therefore, while medical transition can address the symptoms of Gender Identity Disorder, it cannot address the larger issues – though that is not to say that its inability to enact wider social and political change renders it disposable. Much like Cvetkovich's argument surrounding the veteran with PTSD, the treatment for the disorder remains necessary while the overarching cause demands equal attention.

Throughout the performance, Nayfack directly addresses the wider issues lurking behind her own individual experiences. Even her ending song, in which Nayfack declares

her commitment to following her goal to be on Broadway, indicts the hegemonic ideologies which pervade U.S. culture surrounding queerness. Nayfack talks about being near the subway platform in New York and wondering if someone is going to come up behind her and push her onto the tracks. She wonders if anyone would help her up, if she fell. Suicide ideation is not an uncommon theme within the lives of trans people, but once again, even Nayfack's fantasy of death is not an active suicide as much as it is a waking nightmare of being the victim of a hate crime and bystander apathy. With Nayfack's background, it is not an entirely unrealistic nightmare to have. Repeatedly, Nayfack brings to the forefront the ways in which the structures of capitalist patriarchal culture are the instigators of the tragedy in a trans person's life, rather than the experience of being trans itself.

Likewise, there are many moments of trans celebration in Nayfack's performance. The initial celebration, her childhood encounter with the dress, shows a stereotypical moment of early trans experiment with gender expression. As previously stated, Nayfack performs a song of desire and love for the dress, personifying it with a repeated refrain of "I want to wear you / Pull you over my head / I want to wear you / All night and to bed." Even though the song describes a painful moment of being discovered and discouraged, it sets up an almost Romeo and Juliet-esque relationship between young Nayfack and the dress. Like the feuding families, Nayfack's mother keeps the young lovers from one another by clinging to outdated ideals that are merely legacies of old traditions.

Later in the show, Nayfack sings another slow, cathartic ballad about her younger self, Jared, and a phoenix which frequently visits him at his bedroom window. Nayfack

sings fondly of the bond that they share, until the bird one day realizes that she is going to, as the mythic creature does, erupt into flames to be reborn. In the song, the phoenix has spent many years with Jared, encouraging him by telling him that there are good things inside of both him and herself: “There is music in me / And it’s always been there.” As she perils over her fate, to burst into flames and be reduced to ashes, Jared tells her to embrace the fire and rebirth: “There’s a fire in you / And you can’t be afraid / I can’t say I won’t miss you / But I know that you know that it’s time to let go.” Even though it is scary to become something new, when it is your destiny, it will lead to something better and something greater.

Nayfack precedes the story by telling the audience that she got a tattoo of a phoenix on her back when she was in her early 20s: a symbol of “the multiple resurrections of my adolescence.” The phoenix seems an apt metaphor for transness, representing the conflict of coming out and beginning transition, and the rebirth of the bird as our “rebirth” living our lives knowing and embracing our true genders. This song presents an interesting twist to the metaphor, where Jared Allen Nayfack is not the phoenix but, instead, is visited by the phoenix, who turns to *him* for guidance in her moment of resurrection. One might conceive of the phoenix as being Future Shakina, come back to comfort young Jared in his time of need. However, as mentioned, the phoenix’s resurrection is hers alone, not something that is shared with young Jared. Therefore, Nayfack does not see her former self as the phoenix but conceives of the phoenix truly as a metaphor, something for the younger version of herself to look to and in his acceptance of her transformation, he can see a transformation in his future as well.

Here is another moment where the performance embraces queer temporality. Nayfack brings the audience on a journey through her past, to her present, and looking forward to her future. When speaking of herself in the past, Nayfack occasionally switches between using "I" statements to referring to her younger self as Jared Allen Nayfack. There is not enough of a consistency in the performance to argue comfortably that Nayfack sees herself as a different person pre- and post-coming out as trans – in fact, there is evidence to suggest that Nayfack does not see her personal journey as being one that can be divided in that kind of binary, linear way. Later the performance, after she sings of Jared and the phoenix, Nayfack specifically describes her journey of self-discovery, acceptance, and transition as not a move from one identity to another but as a "transcendence."

Rather than construct a plausible history which makes sense of her journey in a chrononormative way, Nayfack embraces the trickiness of trans time. While she stands on stage, in the dress that her mother warned her not to wear, singing the songs that she once sang while trapped in the hospital's solitary confinement, Nayfack defies all of the hurdles placed before her younger self in her process of transcendence. But she stands before yet another moment of resurrection as she faces her surgery and the financial hill she must climb in order to get there. Perhaps, then, what we witness in this song is young Jared singing to Shakina, the phoenix, who is waiting to go up in flames and return anew – from Thailand, with a brand new pussy.

CONCLUSION

One Woman Show debuted at Joe's Pub in 2013. In June 2016, Nayfack returned to Joe's Pub to perform a new one-woman rock musical, *Manifest Pussy*. This performance opens much like *One Woman Show*, with the band beginning to play before Nayfack bounds on stage and begins to sing, to thunderous applause and cheers from the crowd. But this time, instead of singing about being a "Chick with a Schtick," Shakina grabs the microphone and sings:

> Some girls like to set the trends
> Stand out from their friends
> Break out of the mold
>
> Some girls, when the season's through,
> Say hello to the new
> And buh-bye to the old
>
> Well I've seen many a season
> And suffered through the ennui
> But now I'm overjoyed
> 'Cause I'm over-boyed
> All it took was just a little B.N.P.
>
> You know that that means, don't you
> Brand
> Brand new
> Brand new pussy
> That's what I've got

When she sings the words "brand new pussy" for the first time, she grabs herself right between the legs – a callback to the shaker strategically waggling there during "Chick with a Schtick." For this performance, Shakina is not wearing a dress, but a pair of bright red leggings, sporting her wavy blonde weave atop her head rather than her shining bald scalp. And once again, she opens the evening's musical revue with a song about what is

(or is no longer) between her legs. She has changed since last we saw her but remains the same Shakina. After the song is over, Nayfack explains that she took a photo of her penis the last time she used it to urinate before her surgery. “You wanna see?” she asks the audience. After she receives a number of cheers and cries of “Yes!” she pulls out her phone with a wry smirk and says, “I figured you did, so I came prepared.” Then, she turns the phone around and shows the entire audience her last dick pic, including a zoom in for the back row.

In a certain sense, *One Woman Show* is a work in progress about a work in progress. There are many aspects of the performance which contribute to this reading, most notably the advertising of Nayfack’s surgery fundraiser, which reminds the audience that there is another step in the process of physical transition which Nayfack has not yet but intends to take. The contribution of ticket sales to the surgery fundraiser turns the invasive line of questioning which is central to the exploitative autobiographical imperative inside out by bringing front and center the status of Nayfack’s genitals (to which “Chick with a Schtick” also greatly contributes) but places the audience in the position of financial sponsor rather than curious bystander. If you want to know about Shakina’s “schtick,” you must pay the toll – the fee for which directly contributes to the surgery to Kickstart Her Vagina.

Nayfack describes both the performance and the surgery as “a dream deferred.” Nayfack explains that she always imagined that one day she’d get to perform a solo show in front of all her friends, and now she is getting that chance. She also describes, in a later moment of the show, lying in bed as a child and waiting for her vagina to open – which

did not happen. But now, with her surgery fundraiser underway, she is on her way to making that dream come true as well. The dream deferred of the performance ties curiously to her story of being in the asylum. In solitary confinement, once there involuntarily and then, later, voluntarily, Nayfack belts the showtunes that carry her through her traumatic experience. Then, years later, when the facility is nothing but an abandoned building, she re-enters the room and sings again – only to find that her friend who has accompanied her can hear her through the walls. She realizes, in that moment, that the rest of the hospital must have been able to hear her singing when she was confined there, but that the rest of the patients and staff at the asylum never chastised or stopped her.

In a certain sense, Nayfack also uses *One Woman Show* to reclaim that experience. She spends the evening singing a repertoire of her favorite songs, but this time, she is in front of a crowd of loving supporters, rather than trapped alone in a padded cell. With this in mind, *One Woman Show* also participates directly in the legacy of the autobiographical to bring women and their narratives out of the private realm and into the public. Shakina literally brings an experience of forced isolation into the public eye. Additionally, she takes the intimate details of her transition and makes her audience a part of her transcendence by financially contributing to it. By doing so, Nayfack creates a radical space of dialogue where her audience participates in her transition as they witness the telling of it. Time loops backward from my vantage point beyond the screen, where I watch the video on YouTube, and know that with their help, Nayfack will manifest her brand new pussy.

Chapter Three: D'Lo, Transition, and Networks of Community

The previous chapter focused on Shakina Nayfack's work of solo autobiographical performance which centered the life story of the performer. *One Woman Show* exemplified the trans autobiographical act as I have previously defined it, based on Deirdre Heddon and Jay Prosser's respective theories about what constitutes autobiography: a narrative of a life story in which the storyteller – the "me" – is the same as the subject – the "I" – who reflects on the past with the body in the present and an eye toward the future. As I argued, Nayfack cultivates a sense of community in her performance by including her audiences in her transition by way of witnessing a performance that is designated as a dream of her lifetime come true, and also by financially contributing to her transition fundraiser with their purchase of admission. However, the content of Nayfack's performance is still centrally located on herself and her individual journey to, through, and beyond her transition.

In this chapter, I focus on another solo autobiographical performance by Bay Area performer D'Lo, a trans man who creates work about his identity as a queer, trans, masculine second-generation immigrant of Sri Lankan-Tamil descent. While both artists use the conventions of solo performance for their work, D'Lo presents his autobiographical narratives as community events, decentering his individual experience to acknowledge and honor the vast interconnected web of relations that surround and influence his own transition, as well as the ways that these members of his community influence him. Where Nayfack's audience is encouraged to participate in economic

solidarity with her, D'Lo's audiences are invited to partake in and embrace the impact of empathetic solidarity.

SHARING MEMORY, CREATING COMMUNITY

I first encountered D'Lo's work when he performed in Austin in 2014. His performance was produced by allgo, a statewide organization for queer and trans people of color based here in Austin, Texas.[5] As part of D'Lo's residency with allgo, he performed one of his solo pieces, *D'FunQT,* and led a storytelling workshop. The workshop focused on writing, but the first exercise that he facilitated instructed each participant to imagine a place from their childhood that held significant meaning. For most of us, this was a childhood home; in my case, it was my parents' home in New Jersey, where I had been raised. Silently, we closed our eyes and took our minds through a tour of these spaces, guided by D'Lo's voice. He asked us to recall intricate sensory details of the space: the sights, as well as the sounds, smells, and textures. I remembered the deep red of the carpet leading up the staircase; Reba McEntyre singing from my mother's radio; sautéed garlic from the meatballs my grandmother tied with string and fried on the stove; my feet freezing after stepping on the cement garage floor without socks in the winter.

Fully immersed in our recollection of the space, D'Lo then asked us to recall a specific memory associated with the space. The sensorial details of the space in which the

[5] allgo "celebrates and nurtures vibrant queer people of color communities in Texas and beyond […] through cultural arts, wellness, and social justice programming by: supporting artists and artistic expression within our diverse communities; promoting health within a wellness model; and mobilizing and building coalitions among groups marginalized by race/ethnicity, gender/gender identity, sexual orientation/sexual identity in order to enact change" (allgo.org)

memory occurred strengthened our recollection, and we were instructed to utilize those details in our memory of the event. Finally, we were instructed to tell the story of that moment to a partner, using as many of the sensorial details as we could. D'Lo encouraged us to walk our partner through the story the same way that he walked us through the spaces in our memories. We gave feedback to our partners after listening to their stories, reflecting back what we heard and asking questions. It was a useful storytelling tool, an opportunity to engage with one another in an intimate way that felt safe for a room of strangers.

Then, we were instructed to switch partners. With our new partner, we would retell the memory that our first partner shared, using as much of the original partners' storytelling techniques as possible. This included not just the details of the story as it was told to us but also the way that our partner told it in the space: their body language, vocal inflection, volume, and specific vocabulary used. Everyone in the room seemed uncomfortable at first. We looked around and laughed nervously with one another, aware of the intimate and vulnerable task that was laid before us. Eventually, we began. There was a palpable shift in the room's energy. The awkward stillness gave way to a gentle liveliness. It was clear that we were holding our partners' stories with a careful excitement, a sense of the honor in presenting what was presented to us.

I have since adopted this exercise in my own artistic and pedagogical practices. The exercise accomplishes a number of tasks with participants. First, it challenges them to confront the ethics of representation in artistic work. The responsibility of presenting their peer's personal narrative to another person requires participants to consider how

they engage with stories and experiences that do not belong to them. Being in the room with the person whose story they are telling impresses upon them the importance of holding themselves and others accountable for what they produce. This accountability is bolstered by the intimacy and camaraderie fostered among the participating group. Sharing a personal memory forges a connection between the original two partners, as does the practice of sharing that memory with a third partner. By the end of the exercise, each participant has connected with at least three of their peers: their original partner, their second partner, and their first partner's new partner.

I begin this chapter with this story because I feel that my experience in this workshop with D'Lo is exemplary of the argument I make about his work. The exercise D'Lo led was rooted in our autobiographical narratives. We recalled personal memories and shared them with the other members of the group, and trusted them to bring those stories to someone else. By communicating something deeply personal to us, we generated a sense of community, and an entirely solitary and internally focused exercise lead us to connection and solidarity. This is akin to what I argue D'Lo does with his own autobiographically-fueled performance work. By highlighting his networks of community and performatively embodying the people in those networks, D'Lo addresses the vast layers of interconnectedness within his own story. Therefore, D'Lo's sharing of his autobiographical narrative is an acknowledgement of and invitation to community.

Our stories are never just stories about ourselves. Our personal narratives are always rooted in a time and place that is inhabited by other people. And when we share those stories, we forge new connections and communities with the people who hear them.

Unlike exploitative narratives which seek to isolate and pathologize, D'Lo's work humanizes by way of inviting his audiences to understand the full complexity of his community and his ever-shifting place within it. In this chapter, I consider some of D'Lo's solo stand-up comedy work, as well as the full-length solo performance piece, *To T or Not to T*. Through my analyses of these performances, I highlight the ways in which D'Lo uses solo autobiographical performance to foster a sense of community amongst himself and his audiences. I argue that D'Lo's performance of his personal narrative creates spaces which, rather than focus on the details of his transition, honor community interdependence.

D'LOCO KID

From his own website bio, D'Lo is "a queer/transgender Tamil-Sri Lankan-American actor/writer/comedian whose work ranges from stand-up comedy, solo theater, plays, films and music production, to poetry and spoken word" (DLocoKid.com). His list of credits spans a number of productions and forms of media, from his original YouTube web series *Private Dick* to the Emmy-nominated documentary *This Is Me*. For this chapter, I focus on D'Lo's live theatrical work. D'Lo has produced and toured four different solo performances, all based on the events of his life: *RAMBLE-Ations: A One D'Lo Show, D'FunQT, D'FaQTo Life,* and most recently, *To T or Not to T.* All of these performances are solo performance shows in which D'Lo recounts the events of his life, weaving together his skills and aesthetics as an actor, rapper, and writer. These multi-genre live performance works often fuse stand-up comedy, poetry, storytelling, and music

to create polyvocal and multisensory performance experiences. He slides with ease between the staccato stand-up comedy format of anecdotal stories peppered with punchlines and longform monologues which smoothly trace the trajectory of a story from start to finish.

D'Lo's identities and experiences of the world are at the center of his work, often drawing from his own personal narratives as the foundation for his performances and storytelling. The page of D'Lo's website which lists his performances sports the following headline: "It all started when…" This phrase is to autobiographical work what "Once upon a time" is to fairy tales: a cliché which clearly indicates the type of story that is about to follow. It is also conjures the image of a psychologist's office, a patient lying on a couch about to regale the doctor, poised with notebook and pen in their hands, with their trauma-laced life story. By including this headline on his website, D'Lo makes clear that he understands the expectations of an artist who works autobiographically. The phrase references the navel-gazing aspect of autobiography, the storyteller presenting their experiences from a singular perspective, existing in a vacuum in the doctor's office or the theater, wherever the confessional is taking place. D'Lo's work, however, expands the breadth of his autobiographical work to be fully informed and contextualized by the people and places with whom and within which the memories and experiences occurred.

In addition to recalling memories from his past, D'Lo also embodies the people with whom he interacts in his remembering. Stories which involve D'Lo's parents feature the re-enactment of his parents' roles in the narrative, with D'Lo shifting between the body language and accents of his parents and himself. His parents are the most frequent

roles that he takes on, though some performances see D'Lo embodying his friends, other family members, and imagined characters which add further vibrance to his tales. But what remains true of D'Lo's performances is that they are never one-man shows which only feature D'Lo. In every performance, D'Lo incorporates the lives of his family and friends, and these members of his community inhabit his body as he performs their participation in his personal story.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Shakina Nayfack challenged the autobiographical imperative by engaging with the intimate details of her transition in a way that economically benefitted her transition. Rather than giving private information solely to satiate the curiosity of her audience, that information was offered in exchange for financial support toward her Gender Affirming Surgery. D'Lo's work moves in a slightly different direction in order to resist the exploitation of the autobiographical imperative. In this chapter, I argue that D'Lo diffuses the attention from himself and spreads it to his wider community. Where Nayfack narrows the focus to be about not just her transition journey to the present moment but the transition as it is presently occurring, D'Lo shifts the lens of his performance from his transition as it affects him to the ways that the people around him respond to his transition and the journey on which he embarks around transition. As the autobiographical imperative expects that trans people who tell their own stories will focus on their own selves, invasive lines of questioning and exploitative investigations which focus on the private logistics of transition turn the trans subject into an object of voyeurism, a curious stop on a tour of the exotically tragic and marginalized. The expectation of transgender autobiographical narratives never supposes

that the subject has existence outside of their own embodied self. Mentions of parents, families, or loved ones are expected to revolve around the acceptance or rejection of the subject's transition, whether it be social or physical. This turns the subject into a figure of either failure or triumph, the target of either pity or congratulations.

QUEER SOLO PERFORMANCE & COMMUNITY

The solo performance genre in which D'Lo takes part is a genre that has long been recognized as a medium for queer performance. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Holly Hughes and David Roman's 1998 publication, *O Solo Homo* highlights the vast breadth and depth of solo performance by queer artists about queer experiences. Hughes and Roman, solo performers themselves, enumerate the reasons why the solo performance genre fits with a queer aesthetic. The solo performance genre has been a gateway for many generations of performers who challenge hegemonic notions of artistic integrity, normalcy, and decency. The collective of artists included in the NEA Four (Hughes, Karen Finley, John Fleck, and Tim Miller) were all artists utilizing solo performance in ways that disrupted various systems of oppression, including heterosexism, misogyny, and Christianity. As with most literature regarding queer performance, transgender performers are not included in *O Solo Homo*. Indeed, as I have mentioned previously, this dissertation seeks to rectify the dearth of scholarship regarding transgender performance and performance-makers. D'Lo's performances, then, assert a place for transgender performers within the queer-coded genre of solo performance. In this way, his performances both utilize and challenge the conventions of the genre.

Additionally, D'Lo not only makes space for trans people within the archive of solo queer performance, but also for trans people of color and first-generation trans Americans.

The way that D'Lo uses autobiographical material and constructs his performances dramatically shifts the autobiographical gaze from the individual to the collective. By foregrounding his relationships to each of his parents in a majority of his performance material, as well as explicitly calling in the presence and work of his ancestors, D'Lo rejects the notion of an individualistic autobiographical narrative of inwardly-focused self-reflection and self-centeredness. Performances like *To T or Not to T* feature D'Lo performing pieces of his own personal narrative, as well as those of his family members and other members of his community. He shifts the focus of the gaze from his own singular experience to the vast and complex web of relations, actions, and consequences that stem from his own personal narratives. In doing so, his performances resist the exploitative autobiographical imperative by acknowledging and emphasizing the ways in which his autobiography is inextricably tied to the stories and lives of those around him.

D'Lo has explicitly stated that his work is meant to make space for marginalized people, specifically queer and trans people of color, and more specifically, queer and trans South Asians. In a 2009 interview with Robin Sukhadia for *Hyphen* magazine, D'Lo states: "The pieces that I write are about reclaiming your spot at the community table." With this in mind, D'Lo's performances are autobiographical community invitations. Through embodying the people closest to him – his parents, blood relatives,

and chosen family members – in his performance of his autobiographical narratives, D'Lo relates himself to other people in his story by way of their inextricable connections to one another. D'Lo's work does not paint a picture of a solitary subject who navigates a world that does not understand him, only to triumph in his own journey of self-acceptance. Instead, his work displays the rich and vibrant tapestry of his family and wider community and invites his audience to understand the role that he plays within that vast landscape of love and connection.

While D'Lo acknowledges the importance of community within his own story, he also cultivates community within the performance itself. The techniques and strategies he employs in his performances creates a sense of shared communal experience between himself and the audience members. There is hardly ever a fourth wall when D'Lo performs. His words are spoken directly to his audience in the standard convention of solo performance. But D'Lo takes extra steps to ensure that the interactions between himself and his audience are rich and engaging. When you enter the space for a D'Lo performance, the music that you hear is curated by D'Lo himself. The pre-show speech for D'Lo's most recent performance, *To T or Not to T*, is a recording of D'Lo's own voice asking the audience to silence their cell phones. D'Lo ends the recording by saying, "I love you," in the way that one might end a phone call with a family member.

In her article "Impossible Hosting," Sandra Chatterjee argues that D'Lo creates an "undomesticated space" by taking ownership of the stage as both a South Asian-American and as a queer person. Chatterjee speaks to the same values as decolonization: rejecting the adoption of rigid Western ideals of gender, sexuality, and domesticity

which, Chatterjee claims, are a large part of the communities within the South Asian diaspora. These values are some of the products of the colonization of India by white Europeans in the Victorian era. By acknowledging and embracing a gender and sexual identity that is outside the boundaries of these ideals, and also openly acknowledging himself as a part of the diaspora, D'Lo constructs the foundation for a more expansive and inclusive South Asian community for the young people he leads in the YouthWallah organization.[6] Integral to the deconstruction of the established space is the performance of Amma, D'Lo's mother, who Chatterjee argues acts as a mother to all of the young performers in the program and the audience. Amma is a cisgender heterosexual South Asian immigrant mother who is, through her interactions within the deconstructed space, unlearning the same hegemonic western ideologies that D'Lo, as himself, rebukes with his own identity and presence.

At the end of the performance that I witnessed, the November 2019 presentation of *To T or Not to T*, D'Lo bowed for his curtain call, then told the audience to head to the lobby, saying, "I want to meet each and everyone one of you." When he later came out from the dressing room, D'Lo approached every audience member who congregated to meet him and spent time with each of them, talking and getting to know them. When D'Lo approached me after the show, we talked about this project, and he offered his contact information to me immediately, willing to provide any material I needed for my

[6] YouthWallah is a summer arts mentorship program sponsored through the ArtWallah Festival of South Asian art in Los Angeles, CA.

research. Before we parted, he gave me a hug, looked me in the eyes and said, “I love you.” And I fully felt that he meant it.

COMEDY, TRAGEDY, & TRANS TIME

In addition to his warm approachability, D’Lo cultivates a sense of comfort with his audience through the use of comedy, even when presenting difficult or uncomfortable parts of his story. Humorous anecdotes about his complicated relationship to his parents make frequent appearances in his individual stand-up sets, such as a phone conversation shortly after D’Lo graduated college, in which D’Lo’s father, Appa, informs D’Lo that he has procured two potential husbands for him. Telling the story, D’Lo stands center stage and mimics holding a phone in his hand. As he delivers the dialogue, he switches between performing as Younger D’Lo and Appa by drastically changing his body language and accent: “They are brothers,” D’Lo says as Appa, “you can pick which one you want.” This turns out to be the conversation where D’Lo comes out to his father as gay, since at the time of the phone call, D’Lo was identifying as a masculine woman interested in other women. Appa asks, “Are you gay?” to which D’Lo replies, “Yes, Appa. I’m gay.” Appa then replies, “No, you are not gay.” and hangs up the phone. In the video of the performance that I viewed, the anecdote receives a hearty laugh from the audience. The intonation with which D’Lo delivers that final line, so abrupt and with the charming stubbornness that is so recognizable in many of our own families, creates humor out of a moment that might otherwise be disconcerting. This is just one example of D’Lo’s use of the tragic or traumatic as a foundation for humor. With enough distance

between the event and the retelling, any pain that the storyteller may have felt at the moment of the event's occurrence appeared safely contained in the past; the wound has healed, even if it has left a scar.

In his article "Tragedy Plus Time," Oliver Double writes about his autobiographical stand-up comedy routine based on a period of time that he spent recovering from a life-threatening injury. One of the strategies he utilized was to locate fictional material within an autobiographical tale. In his routine, he tells a story about a conversation he had with an elderly woman wherein he recounts the conversation verbatim until the final line, which he fabricates for comedic effect. Discussing this choice, he quotes comedian Stewart Lee, who claims that he constructs his stories in such a way that there is enough truthful material that he, himself, believes the authenticity of the story he is telling. His own belief in the story then brings his audience to a sense of belief in his telling of the story.

Additionally, D'Lo performs the story in a deliberately humorous way, indicating to his audience that laughter is an appropriate response. As he switches between himself and his father, the expressions on his face change dramatically. As Appa, D'Lo furrows his brows and hunches over slightly, directing his dialogue almost to the ground. The story becomes a routine of physical comedy as D'Lo adapts between his own and Appa's body languages. When he shifts back into himself, he does not shift into Present D'Lo, but Past D'Lo, the version of himself at the time of the phone call. D'Lo makes this distinction with his tone of voice and inflection, as well as where he directs his dialogue. As he recounts the conversations, Past D'Lo speaks in a higher register of voice,

indicating youth, but possibly also D'Lo's life before testosterone naturally deepened his voice. When D'Lo speaks to the audience to narrate the tale, he speaks in his natural voice, deeper and more confident than the D'Lo on the phone with his father.

Whether the conversation happened exactly the way that D'Lo presents it on stage or not is irrelevant. The work that we do as audience members in receiving the story is such that we laugh at the presentation, but we also analyze the broader intention behind hearing the story. D'Lo uses this anecdote and the (re-)enactment of the conversation to present the nuances and complexities of his coming out to us. Coming out to his father involved not only telling his father that he is queer, but that he has a partner, and this means that D'Lo will not be following through with the marriage that has been arranged for him. As a vehicle for autobiographical storytelling, comedy creates a space where "authenticity" is set aside in service to impact.

As has been previously stated, the notion of authenticity in autobiographical narratives from trans people is one with myriad complexities: who gets to decide what is authentic and the consequences of that decision; the ways in which we eschew authenticity to circumvent gatekeeping; and authenticity as a moral imperative, deviance from which can find us murdered without justice. It is possible, then, that the unspoken script between audience and comedian, wherein the suspension of disbelief is the vehicle through which the audience finds the most enjoyment and entertainment, creates a space within comedy for trans people to leverage these very skills of creativity.

AMMA, APPA, & TEMPORAL DRAG

D'Lo also utilizes the creative potential of performance and comedy by contextualizing his own narrative through the lenses of his parents. Contrary to common understandings of autobiography, D'Lo never espouses the belief that his journey is an isolated or individual one. Rather, D'Lo acknowledges that the experiences that he has had are intertwined with those closest to him, as well as his wider community and his ancestors. By acknowledging the vast and complex web of relations within his story, D'Lo challenges the exploitative gaze of the trans-centric autobiography by shifting the focus away from his individual choices around his body and his transition. Instead, D'Lo's narratives focus on the reverberating effects of his own past, present, and future, as well as others', on his and their stories, which are inextricably linked through lineage, proximity, and community.

In some performances, D'Lo engages a performative act wherein he fully costumes himself in character as Amma. This has morphed from a performative element of his stand-up to a standalone monologue which D'Lo simply calls, "Amma." During this monologue, Amma recounts the story of D'Lo coming out to her as gay and speaks frankly to the audience about her struggles to accept and understand D'Lo's queerness. The monologue is comedic, but the jokes are never at Amma's expense. The performance is not a caricature meant to demean Amma or to cast her as ignorant and bigoted. It is a heartfelt and genuine portrayal of a mother who deeply loves her child, even when she does not fully understand what is going on their life.

When performing “Amma,” D’Lo fully embodies the character of his mother, not just in body language and tone of voice but in costume and make-up as well. In one performance, D’Lo performs the transformation into Amma while on stage. In front of his audience, D’Lo removes his baggy sweatshirt and sweatpants to reveal that he is wearing a grey skirt and a pink top that bare his stomach. He then produces a larger piece of the pink fabric and begins to wrap it around himself. He vamps at the audience while he changes clothes, making short comments about his parents. The wrapping of the fabric seems to be slightly challenging, and D’Lo cracks a quick joke: “You’ve heard of curry in a hurry,” he says, his attention focused on the fabric in his hands, “This is sari in a hurry.” There is laughter from the audience. Finally, the finishing touch: upon his hairless head, D’Lo places a wig of dark brown hair pre-twisted into thick braid that reaches down to the small of his back. The audience erupts into applause, cheers, and laughter.

In the span of the last few minutes on stage, the audience has witnessed D’Lo trade an extra large hooded sweatshirt for a long-sleeve crop-top; a pair of sagging jeans for a floor-length skirt; and a baseball cap for a braided wig. D’Lo turns his back to the cheering audience and applies make-up while looking into a small hand mirror. But in the mirror, D’Lo can also see the audience, casting backward a furtive glance that acknowledges that he, too, thinks this is somewhat comical. D’Lo takes it all in stride. Then, he puts down the hand mirror, pulls the braid over his shoulder, turns around to face the audience, and smiles. He is now Amma, who holds her hands in front of her and tilts her head slightly. “Hello, everyone,” Amma says, with the kind of motherly voice

that oozes gently like warm honey, “My name is Sita, I am D’Lo’s mother. How are you doing? So nice to see you.”

I consider Amma to be an autobiographical act for several reasons. First is the peek into D’Lo’s earlier life that we gain by seeing him preparing to take on Amma as a character. Then, there is the autobiographical information about D’Lo that we receive from Amma’s monologue recounting the story of D’Lo coming out to her. Further, there is the fact that Amma’s monologue is autobiographical in that she is telling us about her own life and inner thoughts. While this is largely fabricated, since Amma is not herself telling the story, within the narrative in which Amma lives, this is her truth. Finally, the monologue allows the audience to see D’Lo exploring his own relationship to his mother. Thus, there are multiple layers of autobiography occurring at once: the autobiographical material we get explicitly in the text, the fictitious performance of an autobiographical act, and the present-tense autobiographical act in which we as the audience can infer and interpret D’Lo and Amma’s relationship through his performance of this character based on her.

Additionally, on a meta-theatrical level, the sequence of watching D’Lo get into costume as Amma references the transformational scene that is often in pieces of media created about transgender subjects. The scene where a trans woman looks in a mirror and applies make-up, or a trans man is shown binding his chest before getting dressed. When we witness these scenes in media created about trans people, they serve to remind us of the character’s transness in contrast to the identity of the actor. The physical “transformation” of the actor in line with the character’s adherence to an often

conventional gender expression creates a parallel between the actor's costume and the character's gender expression. Even when these scenes are shown in documentary film, which centers actual trans people in stories about their lives, the effect is exploitative and fetishizing. The gaze of the camera is voyeuristic, giving the audience a glimpse into what is typically a private and deeply intimate process. However, when we watch D'Lo wrap the sari or put on the wig, we are not watching D'Lo in his process of readying himself but rather the process of an actor getting into costume to perform a character. While I argued previously that this process gives us a glimpse into D'Lo's cultural knowledge as someone raised as a girl, it also de-escalates the usual stakes when watching a trans person dress in front of an audience. Rather than feeling like secret voyeurs who get to see "the truth" that exists beyond the "facade" of someone's gender expression, D'Lo's audience is given a look at his process as an actor. The act solidifies his role as a performer, not as the object of a curious gaze.

D'Lo's performance as Amma also reminds us of the non-linear nature of time in a queer and/or trans context. In the second chapter of *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman discusses what she calls "temporal drag," a notion which imagines drag performance as "a *temporal* phenomenon […] As an excess […] of the signifier 'history' rather than of 'woman' or 'man'" (62). Citing Butler's theorizations of gender performativity as repetitive and recursive, Freeman asks us to consider the possibilities available to us if we consider that drag shows us not the limits and boundaries of gender but, rather, highlight the shifting nature of gender across and over time. Put simply, "temporal drag" asks us to

remember that gender norms are determined by the culture in which they exist and that these ideals shift over time.

Current understandings and critiques of drag, Freeman argues, rely on an "essential self" which drag performers expand or break apart from a forward-facing chrononormative perspective that implies the superiority of particular forms of fluidity arranged hierarchically against "anachronistic" understandings of gender. Freeman insists that "normative masculinity and femininity can only preserve the lost object of homosexual desire in the form of the lawfully gendered subject by evacuating the historical specificity of that prior object" (70). In short, what Freeman argues is that understanding drag temporally allows us to socially contextualize our presentations of gender and their referentiality to those from history, rather than an innate and invisible sense of the masculine or feminine self.

In this way, temporal drag seems a form of an autobiographical act, a performance of presenting the self in a way that is re-presenting selves of the past, whether those are our own selves or others' selves from which we are drawing the inspiration. By virtue of the act being "drag," the performer is not presenting the self but, distinctly, that which is an exaggeration of what is decidedly not the self. But I argue that by presenting what which is not the self in the context of drag is a way of presenting the self – we can just as easily define ourselves by what we are not as we can by defining what we definitively are. When D'Lo performs as Amma, his choice to take on the role of someone that he has already established as a separate person from himself highlights the fact that he is not performing himself. We have already met Amma in other capacities

throughout the performance, which prepares us for the character that we are about to witness. Additionally, D'Lo speaking to the audience about Amma as he puts on her costume reminds us that we are watching a performance of reference to someone else.

Additionally, highlighting Heddon's assertions that performance is always a dialogue, the simulacrum of Amma holds multiple layers which are compounded by who is witnessing the performance. For audience members who know D'Lo personally, there are three layers of identity and artifice: D'Lo, the person, performing his on-stage comedy persona, who is then performing an avatar of Amma from D'Lo's perspective. D'Lo plays strategically with authenticity and autobiography here as well. D'Lo's performance has been a retelling of the details of his life, curated and crafted into a routine that is meant to elicit laughter of commiseration, sympathy, joy, and discomfort at different moments in D'Lo's storytelling. We know then that the representations of D'Lo's family members, and even D'Lo himself, are crafted specifically to play roles and establish particular dynamics which support the performance's comedic effect. When D'Lo costumes himself and speaks as Amma, we know that this, too, is a performative tactic. In no way does D'Lo attempt to convince us that he becomes Amma. In this performance, Amma is a drag persona that D'Lo adopts, a heightened simulacrum of Amma under which we can clearly see D'Lo.

In some ways, the temporal drag is extended even further as we are, perhaps, seeing a glimpse into D'Lo's earlier life. That he knows how to wrap a sari around himself, and that he can do it so quickly and with such ease, is at once both evidence of his upbringing being socialized as a girl, but also a virtuosity that is often applied to

gender non-conforming people in two highly problematic ways. In one way, cis-identified male drag queens are often praised and lauded for their abilities to perform in ways that are considered natural or inherent to women. Expertly applied make-up, well-styled wigs, aesthetically-pleasing costumes, and walking in high heeled shoes are all behaviors that are expected of women but for which drag queens are often given high praise. Likewise, trans women are often given back-handed compliments about their abilities to "pass" as cisgender women based on their ability to also execute these tasks without difficulty or without revealing what cis people harmfully determine to be the artifice of their gender identity. Trans men also face such treatment, being praised by cisgender people for their ability to perform masculinity in ways that are acceptable, but the reality of executing masculinity does not require the same level of virtuosity regarding aesthetics and physical adeptness as femininity.

Regardless, in each instance, there is a false connection between a person's assigned sex at birth and the performative aspects of gender expression, based in a belief that women and men are naturally suited to the behaviors expected of them by hegemonic ideals of gender identity and expression. As such, when D'Lo demonstrates his ability to quickly wrap a sari, he is at once revealing a glimpse into a part of his life where this behavior was something that he engaged in with regularity, and also highlighting the double-standard which does not allow trans people the ability to reject or manipulate gender norms the way that cis people do. Ultimately, D'Lo's transformation into Amma is an autobiographical act in that it hearkens back to another point in his life, and also

leads to D'Lo engaging in an exploration of his mother's experience of his transition, imagining what her autobiography might sound like if she were to tell it.

To T or Not to T

In October 2019, I flew to Los Angeles to attend a live performance of D'Lo's most recent production, *To T or Not to T*. Directed by Adelina Anthony, *To T or Not to T* is a solo autobiographical performance which chronicles D'Lo's decision to begin hormone replacement therapy. The narrative embraces queer time as it does not move in a necessarily chronological or chrononormative manner from one beginning point to a singular ending. Instead, D'Lo meanders through a collection of memories which demonstrate the moments of his life which have influenced the various decisions that he's made throughout his transition. For narrative structure, *To T or Not to T* uses selections from a speech delivered by Appa at D'Lo's commitment ceremony as its guideposts between the different memories that D'Lo recalls and the anecdotes that relate.

To T or Not to T begins at D'Lo's commitment ceremony in 2015, where Appa is about to give his father of the groom speech and is struggling to use the correct pronouns in reference to D'Lo. The first lines of dialogue that open the performance occur between D'Lo and Amma:

> D: Amma! Please, you have to talk to him. Amma, please! Appa has to get his shit
> together. It's my fucking commitment ceremony!
> A: Don't use four letter words. I tried to talk to him. He said he will not call you by male hormones. (Beat.) You know, you and Appa are exactly the same. No, it's true. I'm in the middle. I see both of you. You are the same. The same two coins with same sides…Complete Headache.

> D: What!? How can you say that!? We're completely different. I'm way more evolved than he is.

When D'Lo speaks as Amma, he turns to a pole that runs from the ceiling to the floor of the theater, which has been adorned with long flowing fabric and jewels, like a decadent maypole. He takes a piece of the fabric and throws it over his shoulders, invoking Amma's sari.

Rather than simply telling us the story of this incident, and each incident that he describes in the course of the performance, D'Lo acts out the interaction, playing all of the roles: himself, Amma, Appa, his wife Anjana, his sister Krishani, his cousins, friends, everyone who is a part of his story. But the central driving force of the show is Appa. Each section of D'Lo's tale, told in almost anecdotal form, are tied to a section from Appa's commitment ceremony speech. Performing as Appa, D'Lo steps up onto a box placed downstage right and, with a pantomimed cup of tea in one hand and microphone in the other, describes moments from his own life. Then, he jumps from the boxes on which Appa stands and launches into a deeper, first-person reenactment of that memory.

D'Lo constantly reminds us of his ancestors and the significant role that they play in his life. By using Appa's speech as the roadmap for his transition story, D'Lo invokes the power and support of his family and his ancestors, reminding himself and his audiences that his transition story is not just his own story. D'Lo reminds us that the story of his transition is also the story of his father's acceptance; the story of his own marriage; and the story of his changing and shifting relationships to his friends. He reminds us that

the web of relations in which we all live is constantly present and integral to our own stories.

The pre-show setting is celestial, very deliberately and literally invoking the vast expansiveness of the universe. Projected against the back wall is a constellation of stars – actual astronomical stars, and also metaphorical stars of Black music history. Photos of blues singers like Ma Rainey float across the sky amongst the sparkling specks, rotating around a full moon painted in the bottom stage left corner of the wall. The use of the galactic imagery connects D'Lo to a cosmos even greater than his immediate communities or even his ancestors. The swirling void of stars during the pre-show sinks the audience into the universe in which D'Lo's performance is set. We are invited into this galaxy, inherently making us part of it. Images of blues singers float by past the painted moon, giving the impression of planets in orbit.

Toward the beginning of the piece, D'Lo gives us some biographical information about himself and his parents, during which he identifies not only where he and his parents were born respectively, but also which constellations they were born under. He identifies that he and Appa were born under the same star in the Leo constellation, which is why they, in D'Lo's words, "live parallel constellation paths of ups and downs." The autobiographical can feel deeply isolating. This is what can make autobiography also feel exploitative and sensationalist. When a trans person is forced to tell the story of their body for the curious cisgender gaze, the focus is squarely on that person and their body. Part of Namaste's critique of the overemphasis on the intimate and biological in these narratives is that it precludes the subject from discussing the oppressive material realities

of being trans. Without being able to speak about experiences of oppression, the systems responsible for subjugation and discrimination cannot be held accountable; nor can those who are subject to oppression find solidarity to combat its many forms and sources. It is an operative tactic of oppression to isolate, to disconnect people from their communities and make individuals feel alone and without support. D'Lo's acknowledgement of his ancestors and his tying his journey to that of his father is one way of resisting the autobiographical imperative's impulse to focus on the singular and the individual. D'Lo will not be cut off from his communities.

Accompanying this galactic setting is upbeat hip-hop music which plays over the speakers as the audience enters. The blackbox theater is set so that different areas of the stage can indicate different spheres of time, place, and space along D'Lo's life. Downstage right sits a set of boxes that serves as a podium for Appa's commitment ceremony speech. From the ceiling in this same area hangs a piece of long, voluminous yellow fabric which D'Lo wraps himself in to perform as Amma and also serves as the cape for Super Auntie. The stage left wall depicts a chain-link fence through which a field and blue skies can be seen, the poles of which are 3-dimensional and protrude from the wall. At the fence throughout the evening we see D'Lo waiting to play gender-segregated freeze tag at recess as a child, or the look on Amma's face when he ran away from home as a teenager in fear of his parents' reactions to his coming out. Upstage left is another set of boxes, arranged so that D'Lo can climb and sit on top of them or lean over them, often depicting private spaces, like D'Lo's bedroom or the space where he and his transmasculine friends congregate to discuss their respective and various transitions.

All of the significant moments in D'Lo's narrative surrounding conversations that he has with his loved ones. The performance opens with the conversation between D'Lo and Amma about Appa's speech. As D'Lo contemplates whether or not to start T, he performs a conversation between himself and two of his queer transmasculine friends:

> D: Because society constructed us bastards way before we even knew how to think. Like sometimes, I think that maybe as a baby, my spirit didn't wanna be no weak-ass, made to feel small… so maybe my baby-self was like, fuck being a girl, "if there's any fights going down, I'm going to be the one throwing blows instead of receiving em." Like is my gender real or is it a response?
> G: Fuchi... Smells like homophobia to me.
> D: Fuck you, Gabe. How's me trying to understand my gender being homophobic.
> L: We're all products of our environment. Even Gabe's transition.
> D: Transition? What? Yo, man, we don't know how safe hormones are!
> G: N'ombre, it's safe enough if your only other option is to die.
> D: (gesturing) Yeah, I'll stick to Henny. It's safer and cheaper.
> G: Primero, testosterone is cheaper. Second of all, you gotta go through a half pint of henny everyday just to engage with the world, so long term, what's safer?
> D: They're just experimenting on us.
> L: Yo Chill D. This is why he didn't want to tell you.
> G: Newsflash D! (cups his hands to his mouth) Gender is all fake! Social constructions on faulty foundations. Why we are the way we are doesn't matter. It's what we do with it. And I wanna have the right to construct myself!!
> L: Yo Gabe, D will catch up. As for me, I'm cool with whatever you decide, but you ain't allowed to get a ballsack.

By performing this conversation, D'Lo shows us not only his own thought process but also pays tribute to the people in his life who helped him come to the decision that he ultimately makes regarding his transition. Replaying these conversations allows D'Lo to engage in a process of deep self-reflection where he gets to inhabit a younger version of himself (not always drastically younger, sometimes simply five year ago, like in the conversation above) and also the people who experienced that younger version with,

often, a knowingness of D'Lo's future that even D'Lo could not, at the time, predict. In this conversation, "L" says that D'Lo "will catch up," implying that L knows that D'Lo will eventually start taking testosterone, despite D'Lo's protests. I read this moment through the lens of queer temporality, as we know that D'Lo decides to begin taking testosterone at some point between when this conversation occurs and the current moment of performance in which we experience him. Much like Shakina Nayfack's performance of the phoenix in conversation with her younger self, D'Lo also travels in time in performance to talk to himself through the voice of someone else. This time, however, it is not a mythical creature that is immortalized in a tattoo on his back like Nayfack's phoenix but, instead, a friend who remains immortalized in the orbit of D'Lo's chosen family.

Additionally, *To T or Not to T* centers the relations between D'Lo and his wider community of queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming people of color. Through focusing on these relations, some close and some parasocial, D'Lo resists perpetuating a narrative of hegemonic patriarchal masculinity. Projections are used in the production to highlight the models of identity which D'Lo used to explore his own understanding of self. Every person referenced is a black woman, most prominently Queen Latifah, who D'Lo cites as a major influence for many facets of his identity. He recalls the first time that he saw the music video for "Give Me Body," where he witnessed Queen Latifah in traditional African clothing and saw for the first time someone who he (incorrectly) assumed was a non-white immigrant openly and proudly displaying her culture. Later, D'Lo identifies himself as Queen Latifah in his group of friends, who he likens to the cast of characters

from the film “Set It Off.” Finally, when D’Lo is distributing fliers to his show at the gay bar, he recounts seeing Queen Latifah as she is leaving the club, and she takes one of the fliers. He falls to one knee, reverently saying, “My Queen,” before falling prone on the floor, giddy that he just encountered his idol – and that she is, evidently, not homophobic.

These moments make it clear that D’Lo’s masculinity is not modeled after traditional Western structures of white cisgender maleness. For this, I want to return to Stone’s evaluation of the use of autobiographical narratives for trans women seeking transition-related treatment. The women writing these narratives documented their transitions in such detail that future generations of trans women could read and use those narratives as a roadmap for their own journeys seeking transition. As mentioned, these narratives were vital for navigating the gatekeeping of the medical industry, which required patients seeking transition care to fulfill particular ideals of gender normativity, including heterosexuality and an adherence to social gender roles. Therefore, the archive of trans autobiography also serves as a guidebook for how to perform gender in a way that aligns with the ideals of white cis-hetero capitalist patriarchy.

D’Lo’s narrative does not follow this structure. When D’Lo imagines his ideal masculinity, the version of himself that he wants to embody, he imagines the masculinity of a black woman who proudly wears the clothing of her African culture and performs hip-hop that embraces her sensuality:

> And THEN an angel came to me by way of a music video on Yo! MTV Raps and my life was forever changed. She was an immigrant kid, like me and wore her

> African Culture proud. Look, I know [Queen Latifah] is not an immigrant, I'm not Ben Carson. My young self just didn't know about black emcees in New York who were reclaiming their African roots. But *her* African pride made me also want to wear *my* Lankan Tamil'ness with pride. Look at her! She wasn't trying to be all sexylicious for men, she was regal. I mean, she called herself QUEEN! And I copped every damn album and studied the lyrics, and gained hope that even if I *couldn't* get my prayers answered to be a boy, I could definitely grow up and be her. This was the first time I was EVER okay being assigned female at birth.

At no other time does D'Lo reference any pop culture figures in imagining his ideal gender expression or identity. What D'Lo expresses in *To T or Not to T* is that his ideal imagining, his projection of himself and his guideposts for how to get there, is less about his relationship to transition and gender than it is related to his understanding of how he wants to relate to his community. Queen Latifah is an icon for D'Lo not solely because she is a woman who displays pride in her masculinity but also because she shows pride in her culture. The same goes for the women whose faces are projected onto the back wall, the blues singers who also proudly displayed their Blackness, their sexuality, and their musical virtuosity. They are also the ancestors who are integral parts of D'Lo's narrative, even if they are not related to him by blood.

QUEER TIME, LIFE, & DEATH

D'Lo addresses the presence and power of his ancestors, those related by blood and those related by spiritual connection, frequently and with vitality in *To T or Not to T*. During various moments throughout the performance, D'Lo kneels up stage right and pours sand in a sigil formation onto a round tray on the floor. A camera suspended above the tray projects a live video feed of the action onto the moon. As he arranges the sand, he speaks about his late sister, Krishani; about their ancestors; and reflects on the rituals

that he performs in order to honor their spirit and memory. Toward the end of the performance, D'Lo carries the tray center stage. Astronomically, what makes the moon bright, what causes the various phases of the moon (waxing, waning, full, etc.) is the reflection off its surface from the brightness of the Sun. Therefore, the projection of the sand sigil onto the backdrop of the moon places the sigil in the place of the burning star around which the galaxy of the performance rotates. Even D'Lo himself, bouncing and pacing and grinding to the various playing areas of the stage, orbits around the tray of sand.

After D'Lo's story addresses the tragedy and trauma of Krishani's death, her face is projected onto the sky of the upstage wall. After the first conversation with his transmasculine friends reference above, as D'Lo says the following as Krishani's face takes is projected onto the entire surface of the moon:

> The thing about having ancestors and being in conversation with them, is that they always watch over me. I know Krishani sent me all my savior queer siblings to push me to look hard at my own journey.

If Krishani is the moon, you might imagine that D'Lo is the sun; the brightest star in the solar system around which all the celestial bodies of the performance orbit. But again, *To T or Not to T* is not an individual singular narrative about one man's story. D'Lo places in the center of his autobiographical performance his reverence for his elders, his community, and his ancestors. His autobiographical narrative sidesteps the navel-gazing of autobiography's roots in white male introspection, instead turning its eye toward

illuminating the ways in which his own journey both parallel and intersect with those around and adjacent to him.

Toward the beginning of the show, D'Lo recites some of the Shakesperean soliloquy from which the title is derived. Crossing the stage from Amma's fabric to the stack of boxes that represent D'Lo's personal space, he adopts a posh English accent as he recites: "To T, or not to T, that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles And by opposing end them." The moment elicits laughter from the audience. The humor is a mixture of cultural dissonance and the affect with which D'Lo delivers this snippet of the speech. He presses his hand to his chest as he spins on one heel and leans back against the boxes, framed in a spotlight that is bright against the whiteness of the boxes and the darkness of the rest of the stage. His accent is deliberately haphazard; he appears an actor who is committed to being half-committed to his dialect work. It also reads as a critique of the formality of Shakespeare and traditional forms of theater. Part of the humor of the moment is watching D'Lo, who had to be scolded by his Super Auntie for dancing lasciviously to Ginuwine's "Pony" at his commitment ceremony, launch into one of the most prestigious (or pretentious, depending on your perspective) of theatrical monologues.

However, beneath the surface level humor lies a grave sincerity. In the original text, this speech is Hamlet's contemplation of life and death. Faced with an impossible task following his father's death, Hamlet grapples with overwhelming existential plight. While the audience laughs at his overly dramatic delivery, D'Lo is speaking truth to the

ways that he felt before he started testosterone. He speaks these truths explicitly later in the performance, when he confesses to Appa that, "I want to die, all the time" and that the queer and trans family at his commitment ceremony are the only reason that he is still alive. The question "To T or not to T" is not simply a question about whether or not to take the step to change his body, but also, the decision of whether or not to live in his body at all.

When Krishani dies, D'Lo's parents grieve the loss of their daughter. D'Lo describes how the family "orbited in [their] own grief" around Krishani's death, each processing it differently. Krishani's death falls heavy on D'Lo not only because he lost his sister, but because his parents will have lost two daughters: one through physical death in a freak accident and another through D'Lo's decision to transition. One was not given the choice to end her tenure as a daughter; but the other made the choice. D'Lo's transition seems, to his parents, a form of suicide, a chosen death, unthinkable and infuriating because of the lack of choice given to their other daughter. What D'Lo has to make clear to his family, and makes clear in this performance, is that his decision to begin hormone treatment is not a process of death but, instead, a decision to continue living. It is a commitment to living that, otherwise, could not have been made.

In Shakespeare's tragedy, Hamlet embarks on a tumultuous journey of self-discovery when he believes the spirit of his deceased father has encouraged him to seek revenge against his uncle, who the spirit claims has murdered him in order to usurp the throne. Throughout the events of the play, the quest for vengeance morphs into a quest for selfhood for Hamlet. Scholars and critics have asked many questions of the play's

text, leading to many dynamic productions of the text. Dramaturgical mysteries abound: Is the spirit real or a figment of Hamlet's imagination? Is Hamlet's descent into madness the unravelling of a mind tormented by an inability to distinguish fiction from reality, or is it another facet of Hamlet's game intended to plague his uncle into an admission of guilt? But regardless of how one chooses to interpret these ambiguous details, what remains is Hamlet's struggle with how to move forward in his life with the expectations that are placed upon him. "To be or not to be" is Hamlet's consideration of what it means to stay alive or die. Life, he postures, is full of strife, and the only way to truly escape the difficulties of life is through death. However, what comes after death is unknown and frightening in its opacity. What is one to do, then, when faced with the choice between the familiar but overwhelming pain of life or the endless possibilities that lie beyond death?

This is a common experience of trans people contemplating medical transition, and one that D'Lo addresses in *To T or Not to T*. Sitting atop the boxes that represent his adolescent bedroom, D'Lo speaks aloud his fear of losing the ability to fully feel his emotions after he starts taking testosterone. Later, D'Lo re-enacts a conversation with his wife, Anjana, about how she feels about his transition and her fears as well as his own:

> A: So...Have you been thinking more about getting on T?
> D: You know, I don't think there's been a day I haven't been thinking about it.
> A: (Sigh) I really wish you would talk to me about it.
> D: Right now, I don't know. Maybe not. I kinda don't want to be invisibilized once I pass, but then there's a toll that comes with being visible.
> A: There's nothing like the swag of a stud. I think you're beautiful as is. You're like the ultimate fuck you to the patriarchy. (Beat) Can I ask you something? If you felt like you could just be you, in this body, do you think you would still want

to take T?
D: Why you keep asking me this? I can't answer that because that's not the world we live in. Can I ask you something? If I do decide to take hormones, would you be ok with that?
A: Ya! Of course, I would be fine with whatever you decide... (beat) I mean, I'm sure there will be some adjusting too. I'll love you however you change physically. I mean, I'm anxious with what T will do to you emotionally… (pause) And, I know that this isn't about me, it shouldn't be about me - your decision to take T or not, is about you…

D'Lo and Anjana's conscious relationship, the decision to move forward regardless of how D'Lo's transition continues, again centers the importance of healthy relationships in D'Lo's life. Ironically, in this conversation, Anjana insists that her feelings about D'Lo's transition are unimportant, insisting that "this isn't about me, it shouldn't be about me – your decision to take T or not, is about you." Yet, for D'Lo, it's not about other people's opinions as much as it is about including them in his process. And ultimately, his decision to move forward is not done in a spiteful way of doing what he wants without regard for others. It is, in fact, a decision made knowing that he has the loving support of those who will stand beside him. He has his own immortality in the relationships that he has built along his journey.

LIVENESS

Live performance also illuminates the choice to live and move toward an ideal future, rather than suffer in the present by being stuck in the past. So much of the work created about trans people, particularly that which is auto/biographical, focuses on subject who have died. When the average life expectancy of a trans woman in the United States is 35 years old, it is not difficult to see why that is often the case. But the choice to

mourn and memorialize our lives after they are lost, rather than celebrating us while we are alive, is also a way of shirking responsibility for the ways in which our lives are often not conducive to staying alive. The strains of poverty, discrimination, and interpersonal trauma are easily cast aside when the focus is placed on our deaths. As I have argued with all of the performances in this project, by presenting oneself live on stage, the performer demonstrates and validates their presence and existence in the world. When D'Lo makes reference to his suicidal ideation, the fact that the audience witnesses him talking about this in person and in real time is a celebration of his perseverance and strength.

By utilizing live performance for his performances, D'Lo also circumvents the potentially exploitative nature of documentary film practices and reception, not just for trans people but for people of all marginalized groups. In another world, D'Lo could have produced a film documentary including interviews with his parents, his wife, and his friends, with video footage of D'Lo with family and his performed monologues spliced between the interview segments. By not doing so, D'Lo eliminates the authoritarian gaze of the camera, instead taking the power of where and how to focus the gaze from the filmmaker to the theatrical audience.

D'Lo also shields his family and friends from the exploitative gaze of the camera by not placing them in front of it. The audience does not witness D'Lo's family tell the stories that D'Lo tells or answer questions which prompt the anecdotes that lead the story of the performance. D'Lo's parents and friends are never asked to provide any labor toward the performance. Rather, D'Lo takes on those personae, the performer accepting the audience's gaze. But this decision also re-centers D'Lo's version of the narrative, and

it ensures that the story is still an autobiographical account. This keeps the performance on one side of the thin line between autobiography and autoethnography. The latter would indicate a main subject which spans the breadth of D'Lo's community, with D'Lo as the ethnographer who simultaneously is part of and studying the community in question. However, D'Lo meticulously includes and invites his community into the performance while also keeping the focus on his own self. When D'Lo performs as Appa or Amma or even the fictional Super Auntie, he is giving us his version of these events from his perspective, as they affected him or relate to his story. The central subject is still D'Lo, despite the number of characters that he inhabits.

The liveness of the performances also demonstrates a sense of virtuosity to the performance which elevates it beyond the exploitative realm of the autobiographical interview or documentary. As previously argued, marginalized people are often assumed to speak autobiographically, an assumption that arises from the centralization of the hegemonic spectator as subject and the autobiographical storyteller as object to be viewed and consumed. Live performance of autobiography disrupts this notion by placing the body of the subject on the stage, contextualized as seen fit by the performer. In the previous two cases discussed, virtuosity also plays a role in these performances, with Dorsey's choreography and Nayfack's musical theater performance. In D'Lo's shows, he demonstrates his virtuosity as an actor and entertainer by taking on the characters in his stories within his own body. The various layers of performance being brought to the stage work to disseminate the focus from the details of the story to the immediate moment of performance unfolding in front of the audience. Additionally, by taking on these

characters, D'Lo demonstrates mastery of his form which grants him capital within the audience-performer exchange. Watching D'Lo slide into the characters of his mother and father show that he is a capable performer doing more than simply telling the details of his stories.

I also contend that this is a flipping of the script for trans performers and characters within narratives. So often, the documentary gaze for trans people relies upon the presentation of trans people represented by cisgender actors in the reenactment of their lives. In previous work, I have discussed the phenomenon of cis actors portraying transgender characters of a different gender, particularly transgender characters based on real people who have since passed away. The notable examples of this are Hilary Swank's film performance as teenage transmasculine midwesterner Brandon Teena in Kimberly Peirce's Oscar-winning 1998 film *Boys Don't Cry* and playwright Doug Wright's live performance as Charlotte von Mahlsdorf in the Tony Award-winning play *I Am My Own Wife.* In these instances, the biographical subject is a trans person, and that person is represented in performance by a cis actor taking on not only that person's identity but also their gender expression. I deemed these performances examples of what I called the "spectacle of transformation" wherein the aforementioned actors received critical praise for their ability to "transform" into their character. The display of virtuosity in these performances is clearly contingent upon the actors' performance of a gender that is not their own: both not cis and not the gender with which they respectively identify.

I, and many others, have critiqued this phenomenon for reinforcing biologically essentialist ideology about gender by casting trans men with cis women and trans women

with cis men. By casting a man in the role of a trans woman, the film asserts that the character is a man in a costume. This equates trans womanhood with male femininity, or drag, or fetishized cross-dressing, or simply just a well-crafted performance. Defenders of these casting choices have often argued that the actors are simply performing, and have likened the choice to cast a cis man as a trans woman to casting an actor to play a doctor, or a murderer, neither of which the actor is in real life. A person makes the choice to be a doctor; a person who murders makes a choice to commit murder.

I choose not to dive into the philosophical discourse of trying to tease out the concept of gender identity as an innate felt sense of self. Instead, I make the argument in return that, if Hollywood has not begun the process of auditioning all genders for all roles, then there is no reason why a role written for a woman should be given to a man, or vice versa, simply because the character is trans. If men are being auditioned for trans woman's roles but not cis woman's roles, that means that the industry thinks differently about the gender identity of trans woman than cis women. As soon as someone can explain why that choice is made without also reifying the idea that biological characteristics determine any factor of gender identity, then I will reconsider my argument. But until then, the choice to cast cis actors in trans roles that do not match their own gender identity communicates that trans people are not seen as their true genders but, instead, as people of one gender masquerading in the costume of another.

Conversely, D'Lo performs as himself, a trans man in various stages of his transition process, and as his parents, binary gendered cis people. He performs as both his mother, Amma, a cisgender woman, and his father, Appa, a cisgender man. I specifically

mention the gender identities of these characters to highlight the importance of a trans actor taking on cis roles, in defiance of the harmful casting trend identified above. D'Lo's performances as Appa and Amma trouble many of the most harmful parts of this practice by showing a trans man live on stage taking on the characters of two actual cisgender people. I will henceforth engage in an analysis of D'Lo's use of cross-gender and cross-generational performance within his autobiographical pieces in order to demonstrate how these particular performance techniques engage with and trouble not only the autobiographical imperative but other harmful tropes of trans representation in the media.

The harmful imagery of a cisgender person portraying a transgender character of a different gender is amplified when the character in question is based on a real person. Because this person existed in real life, their fictionalized counterpart is a representation of the self that they inhabited in reality. Therefore, for example, when a cis man is chosen to play a trans woman, the knowledge that an actor is stepping into this role implies that the real person was a man wearing a costume and playing a role. When portraying the role of a real person, that person's existence in the world heightens the impact of the choice around what kind of actor plays that person in the film or stage production depicting their life. In these instances, the identity of the actor lives in a state of simultaneously being on display and hidden. Their performance is evaluated by how unrecognizable they can become while playing the role, but they have to be recognized outside of the role in order for the performance to be laudable. When a cis man plays a trans woman, he is praised for his ability to play a character outside of his own experiences, but the aspects of himself that signify that this is not who he is remain

central to the positive reception of the performance. Since the praise is of the spectacle of the transformation, there must be an acknowledgment of what is being transformed in the first place. Additionally, because the character is trans, the transformation fully highlights the fact that the character is not seen by the production as a real woman. The actors are rarely ever praised for "convincingly" portraying the gender identity that their character holds, but rather, for portraying a member of a tragically ostracized minority. It is one of the many ways that trans biographical tragedy is turned into profitable storytelling by cis media-makers.

There are moments when D'Lo utilizes filmed footage in his performances. In *To T or Not to T*, images of the women D'Lo admires are projected against the back wall at the beginning of the show. When D'Lo describes seeing Queen Latifah for the first time on TV, the music video plays on an actual television on stage. The juxtaposition of the filmed images against D'Lo's live performance highlights that the people pictured are D'Lo's projected models: of queerness, of masculinity, of being someone with a diasporic identity and experience. Up until this point, we have seen images of various people in D'Lo's life: Krishani projected onto the moon, symbolizing her ever present gaze and guidance; the blues singers who D'Lo acknowledges as his fierce female models of masculinity; the constellations that connect him with the universe around him. We have not, however, seen any footage of his parents. The only reference point that we have for Amma and Appa are D'Lo's re-enactments of them. They live in his body and his body alone, reminding us of their legacy inside of him. This is D'Lo's acknowledgment of both his generational trauma and knowledge.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the show, Appa has given his speech, and he has correctly gendered D'Lo in all of it, referring to him with the correct pronouns and even calling him "an incredible young man." After the speech ends, the scene shifts to the day after the wedding, at D'Lo's family's house, which D'Lo narrates before slipping into the various characters of his family: Amma, his cousin Sivakumar, and finally, Appa. In this final exchange of dialogue, Amma reveals some interesting information:

> Amma: I was just telling them about the chatrakaran. You know, the holy man in Colombo? Oh I thought I told you. I was pregnant with you and he was walking around the neighborhood, and he saw me and said, "Blessings for your baby boy" and I said,"no no, it's a girl", and he said "no no, it's a boy". We all thought he was, you know, crazy.
>
> D: Amma-- you choose to tell me this now? Yeah, Appa, hold on! Amma?!?!

Where D'Lo has thus far been the expert on his gender identity, in this moment, the script is flipped and Amma reveals that there was someone with divine knowledge who sensed D'Lo's masculine energy before he was even born. The narrative also shirks chrononormativity, disrupting the belief that a baby's gender can be determined before they are born by identifying the genitalia in the womb, at which point the parents move forward with preparing to properly gender their baby based on the doctor's expertise. Here, D'Lo's parents had received the medical assessment of his sex, but the man in Colombo contradicts the scientific with the divine.

Before D'Lo can engage further with Amma's story, Appa pulls D'Lo aside and asks to speak with him outside:

A: Dillo, come outside with me. You know, after my speech lots of people came up to me and told me I did a great job.

D: Yeah, it feels amazing when good people, your community, witnesses you.

A: I didn't tell them that you wrote the whole thing.

D: That's okay, those were your stories. (Smiles) And, you wouldn't have said those words if you didn't feel them, right?

A: Ya. (Pause) you know, if I would've known the response was going to be that great, I would've gone on for longer.

This conversation returns us to authenticity, intention, and impact. Here, D'Lo acknowledges that just because he wrote Appa's speech does not mean that the meaning and impact of the words were not authentic. In fact, there is something powerful in Appa, who we have seen struggle to acknowledge D'Lo's personal journey, allowing D'Lo to write the very words that Appa will read aloud as his own to the room full of their family and loved ones. Part of Appa's journey of acceptance is to let D'Lo write the script for his blessings.

Additionally, D'Lo has created another layer of performance to unpack. At the very end, we find out that we have witnessed D'Lo performing his scripted version of Appa delivering D'Lo's words. The lines of authenticity and performativity are dense and blurred almost beyond comprehension. I read this as further testament to the futile mission of quantitatively determining authenticity. If Appa did not mean the sentiment behind the words of the speech, he would not have said them. Just because he did not write them does not mean that they do not reflect how he feels, and ultimately, they serve their purpose: Appa publicly presenting his support and love for D'Lo as his son. Likewise, *To T or Not to T* has done the same with regard to D'Lo's transition. As the

title suggests, we have witnessed D'Lo's public presentation of the many factors and experiences that influenced his decision to begin HRT, the intimate details of which are irrelevant.

The show ends with video footage of Appa – the real Appa – delivering his commitment ceremony speech. The real Appa sits on a couch, reading from a paper in one hand into a microphone gripped in the other. Beside him sits D'Lo and his wife, holding each other's hands as Appa speaks. This moment is our first and only glimpse at the real Appa, not D'Lo's performance of Appa. In this video, we can see that D'Lo standing on the box on the stage is not a 1:1 representation of the situation that he is recreating, as we can clearly see Appa sitting down to give his speech. And what D'Lo leaves his audience with is not his own performance of himself, or his performance of Appa, but Appa himself, speaking the words that D'Lo wrote in order to honor him. At this moment, D'Lo invites his audience to witness Appa's speech. He invites us to be the "good people," the community, that witnesses Appa's transformation firsthand.

Therefore, D'Lo has taken his own autobiographical performance and used it to acknowledge the ways in which his transition also ushers in the transitions of the people around him. He brings to our consciousness the understanding that life is, for all people, cis or trans, a series of transitions; that to live a life is to see oneself and one's loved ones grow and shift and change in ways that are occasionally confusing and difficult for both them and us. He resists the exploitative gaze of the medical transition narrative while still centering his transition experience through his rejection of linear chronology within the performance arc, demonstrating his virtuosity through his embodiment of different

characters, and expanding the scope of his narrative to encompass his vast networks of community.

Chapter Four: Sean Dorsey, Lou Sullivan, and the Embodied Archive

I opened the introductory chapter of *Transitioning Bodies* with the story of the first time I witnessed Sean Dorsey's work at Dixon Place experimental theater in 2009. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that my witnessing of *Uncovered: The Diary Project* at that time and place was essentially the catalyst for the work that led me to this dissertation today. As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, Dorsey's work was not my first exposure to transgender identity or autobiography. I had, like so many other young trans people looking for instructions or answers for who I was and what I should do about it, read texts full of queer theory and narratives written by trans authors. But nothing compared to being in the room with someone who I could visibly see, with whom I could share space and time and breath, that my identity felt real and tangible to me. Seeing Dorsey on stage, knowing that he was living and breathing as a trans man, demonstrated to me that I could be what I always knew I wanted to be.

That evening, I experienced numerous layers of trans presence, both past, present, and future. Dorsey and I shared space in the present moment, existing simultaneously within material reality. Trans activist, author, and playwright Kate Bornstein introduced the performance and, as an older trans person, demonstrated for me a future where I could stay alive and my transness could thrive. Through presenting the diary entries of Lou Sullivan, Dorsey presented to me a glimpse at my community's past, connecting me with one of my *transcestors*, showing me that transness has existed and flourished in times preceding me. I felt suspended in time, surrounded by the possibility and glory of that which came before, that which exists, and that which will come soon.

Uncovered: The Diary Project is a performance piece which grapples with notions of trans time and the ways in which we reach for each other's stories as a means of having a roadmap for our lives. In the performance, Dorsey presents two suites: "Lost/Found" and "Lou." The former is inspired by Dorsey's own experiences as a young trans person searching for meaning and guidance in his journey toward his masculine identity in the pages of his own former diary and the diary of a young boy that he finds at a thrift store. "Lou" is based on the diary entries of Lou Sullivan, an activist and transgender man who bequeathed the archive of his lifelong journal entries to the GLBT Historical Society after his death in 1991.

Dorsey engages with the complicated relationship between trans people and the autobiographical in two vital ways in *The Diary Project*. In "Lost/Found," Dorsey rejects the notion of a plausible history where being born a cisgender boy would have saved him the suffering he felt being raised as a girl. Finding the young boy's diary and discovering that they – both he and the boy – shared more in common than he anticipated encourages Dorsey to document his present self and look toward the future. Rather than re-write his past, Dorsey chooses to continue writing his present in the pages of the boy's diary as he moves through his own transition process. Subsequently, in "Lou," Sullivan's written autobiography is presented through Dorsey's dancing body and his narrating voiceover, bringing an archival record of a past trans life into the embodied present. Through these interweaving of timelines, bodies, and narratives, *The Diary Project* serves as a demonstration of the deeply meaningful relationship that trans people have to the autobiographical.

SEAN DORSEY

Sean Dorsey formed his company, Sean Dorsey Dance, in 2005. From his earliest work, Dorsey has been invested in presenting the narratives of trans and queer people in a nuanced but ultimately positive light. In 2002, Dorsey started the Fresh Meat Festival, centered on performance-based work from all genres by trans, gender-nonconforming, and queer artists. The name of the festival, which will have its 18th anniversary this coming summer, is a repurposing of the term "fresh meat," used to dehumanize and objectify people by reducing them to the extent to which their bodies are viewed as sexually consumable. Dorsey himself acknowledges that the Fresh Meat Festival is "about reclaiming power over our bodies" (Howard).

Dorsey frequently states that he delayed the beginning of his dance career because he did not see anyone like him in the field of dance. Without prior knowledge of trans dancers or choreographers, Dorsey never believed that a career in dance was a possibility for him. As he says it, the idea of a career in dance did not simply seem like an unattainable goal. To him, it seemed so implausible that the very idea of it did not exist in his imagination at all. It was as though becoming a dancer and choreographer was a career path that had not yet been invented. Over the years that he's worked, Dorsey has more than filled the void that once existed where his career as a trans dance artist now sits. In addition to a hefty catalog of critical acclaim and an ever-growing list of awards (an NEA grant, a Dance/USA Artist Fellowship, and five Isadora Duncan Dance awards, to name a few), in October 2019, Dorsey became the first openly transgender person on the cover of Dance Magazine. In the accompanying article, author Claudia Bauer writes

that Dorsey is now “the role model that [Dorsey] always wished he had” (DanceMagazine.com).

The idea of becoming the person that one always needed when one was younger is a common one among queer and trans communities. It speaks to a sense of “queer time,” about which trans scholar and author Jack Halberstam frequently writes. Rather than having role models that one attempts to emulate as one is forming one’s sense of self, queer and trans people often have no guidelines for how to become who they want to be because they do not see anyone who looks like them or identifies the way that they do. Hence, many queer and trans people formulate a sense of self and identity with the goal of becoming a role model for younger generations. In a way, some of us look backward as we move forward, acutely aware of and informed by our knowledge of what did not exist for us as we evolve into what and who we are.

The notion of needing to leave something behind for younger generations is particularly salient for trans people. For those of us who pursue any avenue of transition, the journey of growing into ourselves requires, in many cases, a rebuilding or restructuring that involves more than just our emotional and mental evolution. Medical transition requires navigating systems of gatekeeping and bureaucracy that are confusing at best and traumatically oppressive at worst. What has saved the lives of many young trans people in their transitions have been the autobiographical accounts of older trans people. Scholar Sandy Stone has written on the particular importance of autobiographical narratives of older trans women for younger trans women, due to the circumstances for trans women within the medical field and the treatment of trans women in society. Stone

mentions that most young trans people have their own archives of autobiographical writings by other trans people which are, in many cases, the only connection that they have to a wider trans community. These narratives also, particularly for trans women, serve as roadmaps and guidelines for traversing the medical industry in order to gain access to medical transition.

Dorsey states openly in the performance that there are parts of Sullivan's story which resonate with him. We know that Dorsey is not Sullivan, and the performance never expects us to believe that he is, in the same way that we know an actor playing a role is not the character he plays, even if we forget that during the performance. But there is a distinct resonance in the performance when Dorsey shows us that his and Sullivan's stories parallel. When Sullivan speaks about the "limitless joy" he experienced after he began to medically transition, Dorsey shows us his bare chest, with the scars from his top surgery clearly visible. This is an experience that is unique to Dorsey and to Sullivan. It may also resonate for other trans people in the audience, either who have experienced that feeling or imagine that one day, they will, too. Dorsey shows us that he knows, intimately, what Sullivan meant by his thoughts and feelings, because Dorsey went through the same process.

The moment where Dorsey bares his chest to the audience as his recorded voice reads Sullivan's ruminations on his own post-surgical body brings clearly to the forefront that Dorsey's own self is an integral part of this piece. In the process, Dorsey wears many hats: archivist, transcriber, choreographer, producer, and performer. Dorsey's own self, or many selves, are at the heart of this production. The moment that Dorsey shows us what

Sullivan is speaking about, the way that Sullivan's words resonate with him because of their shared experiences as transgender men, Dorsey is placing himself in the narrative. This is made potent by the immediacy of live performance. Sullivan's words become flesh as we stare at Dorsey's body, which he has graciously presented to us.

Autobiographical work also need not entail a performer telling the audience the story of their life. As theories of phenomenology argue, very simply, our bodies exist, and we exist with them. This is not to argue that all performance is autobiographical because it utilizes a body. However, the way that the body is presented within the performance can be as much an autobiographical act as the oral delivery of a monologue about the performer's life. Dorsey's body is a part of his autobiography, and Dorsey's body tells a story. Within the context of Sullivan's reflections on his mental state during his transition, seeing the reveal of Dorsey's chest provides for us a supplement to the narrative. However, unlike the actor who puts on a costume to demonstrate their embodiment of a character or dons a prosthetic to alter the appearance of their physical characteristics, Dorsey's body is a part of his personal stake in the story that he is telling. Dorsey did not get top surgery so that he could more accurately portray the role of Lou Sullivan; Dorsey's flat chest is a signal to the audience that Dorsey himself shares this experience with Sullivan.

By using someone else’s autobiographical writing to show us a glimpse into his own life, Dorsey avoids focusing solely on his own transition narrative. The moments that he draws our attention to his own transness, such as the moment of baring his chest, are that much brighter for the audience because the rest of the performance has not

centralized Dorsey's own experiences. And by coupling his own *uncovering* with words that came from someone else's personal narrative, Dorsey forces his audience to deal with "the thing itself" – his body, in front of us, in the state that he currently finds himself. Again, this is coupled with the visceral experience of witnessing the virtuosic exertion of dance. His chest heaves with his breath, labored from his movement; there is a glistening of sweat, indicating his own exertion under the bright lights of the theater. These are not before and after photos projected on a screen above us. The audience witnesses Dorsey's body as he lives and breathes, literally, right in front of us. The choreography and Dorsey's execution of it is the spectacle that draws our eyes, not the reveal of his chest.

The immediacy of performance, which Heddon highlights, matters in this instance in terms of time as well as somatic experience. Here, we should recall Prosser's notion of the future trans body that will be inherited by the person who wishes to but has not yet pursued medical transition; the "right" body that the "wrong" body should become. Dorsey revealing his chest to the audience clearly indicates that he has sought and accessed certain procedures of medical transition. Live performance as the medium for this performance directly challenges the notion that transition has a fixed end. Not even the archive can infinitely preserve something in a permanent state of being – paper will begin to degrade after time, photographs fade, paintings need to be restored. As technology advances, recording material begins to sound distorted and undergoes its own process of electronic decay. Hence, I acknowledge that any notion of invincible and pristinely preserved archival material is a fallacious one. However, the recording of

Uncovered which I have viewed on the internet preserves Dorsey – and, more importantly, Dorsey's body – in a place and time and state of being. No performance before or after that recording was exactly alike. Dorsey will never sweat in the same way or breathe in the same pattern and, like all bodies, his will change with age and experience.

Therefore, much like Nayfack's series of performances which benchmark different moments in her ever-changing physical transition, Dorsey continuing to perform this piece over time challenges the notion that transition is a fixed point in time, as Dorsey's body will never be the same as it was in each performance. Likewise, his relationship with the material may also shift and change over time. The moment of removing his shirt may take on a different connotation as he ages, or if he experiences any major changes to his body (for example, a hypothetical appendectomy leaving a visible scar across his abdomen). The moment will never cease to be autobiographical, as Dorsey's body will always be his own; however, the experience of that moment and context will change. I do not ascribe a Salamon-esque explanation to this moment that would ask that we consider Dorsey's relationship to the performance equal to its own presentation – indeed, I think we should focus on "the thing itself" and our interpretation of it. However, I want to highlight that Dorsey is a living trans person who has created and participated in a live concert dance performance about a deceased trans person whose life was tragically cut short.

DORSEY, SULLIVAN, THE ARCHIVE, AND TIME

As I argue about all of the works in these chapters, *Uncovered* acknowledges and works within an alternative framework of time and chronology than Freeman's theorized chrononormativity. Through his engagement with the archive of Sullivan's diaries, Dorsey has reached into the past to bring an account of history into the present. By engaging with a history that is steeped in notions of queer temporality, with and about a body that resists the linear chronology of capitalistic gains by instead embracing a return to the biologically adolescent in order to fashion a present and future that can be fully realized in adulthood, Dorsey acknowledges and celebrates the ways in which Sullivan actively rebels against the oppressive ideology behind chrononormativity. Simply put, the ways in which Sullivan rebuked hegemonic norms by virtue of being a gay trans man are the very traits and behaviors that Dorsey cherishes through his performance and emulates in highlighting his own transness and trans history throughout the performance.

Sullivan's stake in history is directly tied to his rejection of capitalist conceptions of success, lifestyle, and productivity. These ideals are steeped in ensuring that the model of perfection advances a capitalist workforce that sees as its ultimate goal the propagation and capital generation of the species. As Michel Foucault theorizes, in the eyes of the state, the most useful and valuable bodies are those that are obedient and serve the interests of the state. The systems that create these docile bodies are those woven into the fabric of society: schools, the military, the workforce, etc. Docility requires a mastery of the body; control over not only the gestures that the body makes but also the way in which the gestures are executed and the result of the body's gesturing. For example,

soldiers are taught how to march in line with one another, with a predetermined sequence of movements regarding the placement and motion of the arms and legs. These standards change over time, in service to the state's needs. And this is precisely the system which governs medical gatekeeping for trans bodies; the very system that Lou Sullivan attempted to challenge with his own transition.

Derrida argues that in order to contain (control) violence in society, the law must contain (utilize) violence. Laws only exist to the extent that they are enforceable. When the same construct is applied to "natural" law, then natural laws must also be enforceable in order to be present. Hence, when a person seems to 'defy' the laws of nature, a medical professional's goal is to find a way to enforce the law. In his book *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body*, Ed Cohen applies the concept of biological immunity and the body's war against germs and disease as the central focus of the legal enforceability mentioned by Derrida. I will apply it here to the medical industry's view of transgender experience and medical transition. First, there is the misconception that sex is equivalent to gender; that one's biological factors dictate one's gender expression and identity. Countless scholars and activists, from the fields of gender studies to biology, have debunked this theory, and yet it continues to be upheld not only in social but also professional legal and scientific contexts. This view has not only contributed to the mistreatment and abuse of trans people but also widespread misconceptions and stereotyping about the transgender experience. The commonly referenced adage of being "in the wrong body" has an inextricable link to the concept that

there is a “right” and a “wrong” body for a person that is dependent upon that person’s understanding of an intrinsic gendered self.

Contesting this view, Judith Butler’s work on phenomenology and gender performance controversially touched on this with her theorization that gender expression is a performative act, repeated and socially re-inscribed by its repetition. When a trans person seeks various modes of medical transition (HRT, GAS, and/or a variety of other procedures), the implication is that there are aspects of the individual’s biology that must change for one to lead a safe, happy, and healthy life. This implies one of two things: either nature’s laws are being rejected by the trans person seeking to alter what is “natural;” or, the natural world has made a mistake that the trans person requires the assistance of the medical industry in order to right nature’s wrong. Whichever the ideology, there is a natural law that needs to be enforced regarding the connection between biology and gender. Additionally, we see this in the ways that trans people are asked to earn their access to medical transition, as discussed in the introductory chapter. The Real Life Test (RLT) requirements ask individuals to prove to their doctors that they are prepared for being socially recognized as members of their gender (not the gender associated with their biological sex). There are myriad reasons for enforcing this requirement, including but not limited to doctors’ fear of legal retribution in the event of a patient experiencing post-transitional regret or, far more likely, violence in the wake of their transition. It is, in fact, a requirement that reinforces the existence of transphobic violence by asserting it as a fact of life; patients seeking medical transition are conditioned to expect backlash and difficulty, and if they cannot handle it, they are

denied their referral and, essentially, encouraged to go back into the closet. Here, we see the laws of the social world directly affecting the world of medicine and bioscience and vice versa. Transphobia is accepted as a logical response to trans existence because trans existence is seen as an aberration of nature. It only makes sense that trans people would be rejected by the social world because, from this perspective, we are also rejected by the natural world.

Additionally, as seen potently in Lou Sullivan's case, the presumption of the laws of the natural world, applied from the laws of the social world, preclude certain people from accessing transition because their transition would break natural laws. Sullivan's diary entries detail how doctors struggled to reconcile his attraction to men with his gender identity. Doctors viewed heterosexuality and procreation as natural laws which made Sullivan's gender identity an anomaly when combined with his sexuality. Essentially, the medical industry both failed and refused to attempt to understand why Sullivan would pursue transition if it meant he would be gay. His doctors' refusal to grant him access to medical transition indicates multiple layers of disbelief and tyrannical force in the name of "natural law." He could not possibly be a man if he wanted to have sex with men, because homosexuality was unnatural. Doctors could not possibly grant him the ability to become biologically male because they would be, implicitly, condoning homosexuality. Furthermore, taking Cohen's understanding of the modern body, which is preserved by the government in order to ensure the advancement of the state, how would a body that could procreate and fulfill the duties required of a body by the state possibly become productive if it was stripped of its ability to do so?

Finally, as Cohen and Derrida claim, the laws of nature are inevitable and the laws of society are iterable. The state must enforce its law in order to validate the law's viability and the state's authority to enforce it. The ouroboros spins once more. A body that willfully rejects its productive potential cannot be condoned by the state. Trans people cannot be immune to the law. For Sullivan to be granted access to transition would be to give up on his potential to be a heterosexual woman and, worse still, allow him to become a homosexual. The medical industry acts as an arm of the state. Never mind moral panic about the homosexual agenda or homosexuality as an act against God – homosexuality is a state of being that acts in direct opposition to the state's desire and need for bodies that propagate its power.

As previously stated, Dorsey became the role model he needed when he was younger by filling the gap left by the dearth of trans people in the field of dance. Sullivan became the trancestor that he did not know he could be by breaking down existing barriers to medical transition and uniting his community through his social and legal activism. His donated diaries indicate, on some level, that he wished for future generations to be able to access the account of his life. These diaries then became the inspiration and backdrop for a performance created by one of the first and most prolific professional trans artists in the United States. And in 2011, a performance of this piece would be an influential experience for a 19-year-old trans person who would go on to write a PhD dissertation about trans autobiography and live performance. Hopefully, this dissertation will fall under the gaze of another trans person who will find something in it

which resonates with their experience and leads them to create something that will continue the cycle of inter-generational connection and guidance.

UNCOVERED: THE DIARY PROJECT

Uncovered: The Diary Project premiered at Dance Mission Theater in San Francisco on January 29, 2009. In an article for the San Francisco Chronicle, Dorsey stated that *Uncovered: The Diary Project* was motivated by his "curiosity as an artist and activist around the gap between recorded history versus collective memory versus actual lived experience when transgender/queer people get left out of history books" (Nataraj). It seems to me that the spaces between these modes of historiography is where the autobiographical truly lives. Autobiography is, in whatever medium its author chooses, a recorded history of memories reflecting actual lived experience. When it comes to trans or queer subjects, our stories are often struck from the record in one way or another: either left out entirely or told in such a way to minimize or eliminate our trans and queer identities. Autobiography, however, leaves little to no room for speculation. And although memory is ephemeral, even within our own minds, the value of the autobiographical comes not from the objective accuracy of the author's retelling of events as they happened, but the conveyance of the subject's internal thoughts and feelings in response to the world around them.

The Diary Project serves as a bridge between the lives of two transgender men, Dorsey and Sullivan; an intra-community link between present and past. By presenting Sullivan's story alongside parts of his own, Dorsey pays tribute to his *transcestors* and

expands the breadth of his performance's content beyond the subject of his own body. One could argue that the use of dance, a medium that is centered around the measured and masterful manipulation of the body, for a story about the trans experience necessitates a fixation on the body as a subject of the story. However, *The Diary Project* places its focus on the autobiography of the subject, rather than the subject himself. Throughout the performance, Dorsey rebukes an exploitative focus on the bodied self through a few key choices: a narrative focus on a subject other than himself, the inclusion of an accompanying ensemble, and his choreographic repertoire.

As Jack Halberstam notes in his 2005 book *A Queer Time and Place*, cisgender authors of biographical work centered on trans subjects frequently present misleading narratives in order to "normalize" the subject within hegemonic parameters of lifestyle and identity. Subjects who lived as a gender other than that which they were assigned at birth often have their gender identities invalidated by narratives which give explanations for their "cross-dressing" that preclude the notion of transness altogether.

Uncovered also resists constructing or perpetuating popular narratives of trans-normativity in its presentation of Sullivan's story. In the description for *Uncovered*, Dorsey writes that the piece is "the culmination of a year-and-a-half long research process" which involved "[distilling] 30 years of [Lou Sullivan's] journal writings [in order to] [choreograph] a suite of dances based on Sullivan's remarkable journey" (seandorseydance.com). Despite this description, Dorsey's work is not autobiographical in the traditional sense as Hesford describes it: "a chronological record of a life already lived or as the retrieval of an essential essence or truth" (L167). The archive of Sullivan's

diary may ascribe to that genre of autobiographical writing, but Dorsey's dance piece does not follow that trajectory. Nor does Dorsey engage in the traditional autobiographical act of creating a show about himself and his own journey.

Speaking about a project of the Asian-American student alliance at Oberlin College, Wendy Hesford claims that students discussing their personal experiences of campus marginalization and personal identification accomplishes the work of dispelling notions of marginalized homogeneity. By collecting the various autobiographical writings of students within the wide Asian-American demographic, the students' individual stories, Hesford argues, "fracture fixed autobiographical scripts [and] represent the shifting identities and multiple identifications among communities" (L142). This is also one of the consequences of Dorsey's construction and performance of *Uncovered*. The students in Hesford's study demonstrate the variety of experiences and identification practices of young people within a vast ethnic demographic. One of the students explains how she previously identified herself as Pakistani, as this was her family's country of origin. However, when she arrived at Oberlin, she found a larger community of support by identifying herself more broadly as "Asian-American," an identity marker she had not previously adopted for herself. The geographic accuracy of that identity aside, the student's autobiographical narrative displays not only diversity within the wider group, but also sheds light on the constructed nature of the identity group. In this way, by sharing her own story, the student not only provides an example of the group's heterogeneity, but also reveals the inner machinations of the group's identity politics which make such heterogeneity possible.

Uncovered engages in a similar, though not identical, process of monolith deconstruction. Dorsey reveals in the description of the piece that he sourced diary entries from a number of queer and trans people for this project, not just Sullivan's archive. However, as I stated earlier, the performance is split into two suites: "Lost/Found" and "Lou." The latter section is, obviously, named after its subject. However, the first section makes no reference to the subjects whose narratives it includes. It is, in fact, unclear whether or not any personal narratives are directly referenced at all, or if Dorsey constructed a fictional narrative that was simply inspired by the events witnessed by reading the autobiographical accounts of these unidentified subjects. This creates a curious conundrum for the first suite. One could argue that Dorsey has, in fact, engaged in the consolidating of a trans monolithic mythology by combining these stories into a slurry of "autobiographical soup" to which he dances as the Obviously Trans Subject in this Obviously Trans Story. The narrative trajectory of "Lost/Found" does not help to counteract this argument, as it presents a rather cliché story of a young person, mistakenly identified socially as a girl, who is given a diary meant to cater to young girls. The child then, years later, finds the diary's "boy" companion book at a thrift store and reads it, finding that they identify strongly with the writer of that diary, who is, while perhaps not trans himself, in some way a gender non-conforming child as well.

Years later, the subject finds the complementary 'Diary for a Young Boy' at a thrift store and reads the entries, hoping to find some guidance on how to be closer to their true self. However, they find that the author of the boy's diary is not quite the model of masculinity that they were hoping for -- but is, in fact, more like the subject themself

than they ever thought possible. Dorsey has stated that this story is based on his own experiences; he had a 'Diary for a Young Girl' as a child and did, in fact, find a 'Diary for a Young Boy' at a thrift store years later.

At the top of "Lost/Found," the lights go up on Dorsey, alone on stage, wearing a brown sweater vest over a white t-shirt and blue pants. Dorsey moves fluidly, arms constantly outstretched and windmilling as his legs carry him back and forth across the expanse of the stage. Over the speakers, his voice describes the subject, referred to with the personal pronouns "I" and "me," receiving the diary and observing its details. "I filled up the diary," the voiceover explains, "but not the shoes of womanhood, clearly." Dorsey's voice goes on to describe how the subject tried to "fit" their story within the "flowery lines" of the diary, and Dorsey's arms collapse tight to his sides, his hands splayed open and pushing downward as if attempting to cram his lower half into a space that does not have room for his body. The choreography is not often such a one-to-one reflection of the narrative, but here, Dorsey displays for the audience that the attempt to fit his personal narrative onto a page designed for femininity and girlhood felt akin to a failed attempt to fit his body into parameters for which he was not truly shaped.

Here, the dance becomes a meta-commentary on the autobiographical genre itself. Dorsey is speaking directly about the process of autobiographical writing and how social expectations affect and impact our internal modes of reflection and subjectivity. Cataloguing his day-by-day thoughts and feelings in a book labeled for "a young girl" does not feel right. The subject describes putting the diary away and then, at age 24, being at a second-hand bookshop and finding the complementary "Diary for a Young

Boy." At this point, Dorsey is joined on stage by company member Brian Fischer, dressed identically to Dorsey (white shirt, brown vest, blue pants). When Fisher enters the stage, he mirrors Dorsey's movements upstage, slightly obscured by the shadows cast by the lighting. He and Dorsey perform the same choreography for a few moments, then break into their own individual movements. Fisher twirls his way downstage until he is front and center and Dorsey stands upstage of him, watching him as the voiceover story describes finding the "Diary for a Young Boy."

For the remainder of the piece, the audience sees Fisher as a depiction of both the diary itself and the boy who wrote in it. The voiceover goes on describing the book: "It was remarkable. It was the same, but different." The narrator is referring to the binding and layout of the book pages; how, despite being marketed for a different gender, the two diaries were designed very much the same way. At this moment, Fisher and Dorsey both perform slightly altered versions of the same choreography, legs bowed out to lunge and twist across stage, arms outstretched and flowing in wide arcs. The dancers bring their own bodies and styles to the identical choreography, one occasionally lagging slightly out of time with the other, a swinging arm sometimes falling or rising a moment before or after another. The uniquely mirrored choreography speaks to a grander message about gender roles and identities being communicated by the piece. Both Dorsey and Fisher perform the same choreography similarly enough that it is recognizable to the audience as the same, but different enough that they maintain their individuality. In the same sense, the two authors in the story find common ground in their own experiences of puberty and

boyhood. They experience the same world, just slightly differently. In this piece, there is room within the parameters of masculinity for varying expressions of the same gender.

Dorsey's voiceover introduces the entries of the diary, "exactly as they were written," and Fisher strikes a presentational pose downstage before he takes off on a bouncing stroll. On stage, Dorsey watches him, then follows his stride and the two mirror each other's choreography while the entries are read. The entries scaffold a series of experiences that appear, to varying degrees, like the experiences of an adolescent cisgender boy and a transgender man taking testosterone. The first entry finds the boy describing envy toward a friend who has gone on a date, lamenting that "my nuts will probably petrify before Loser Me gets any action." Here, Dorsey and Fisher both reference their crotches. The next entry talks about how the same friend, Todd, has grown a mustache. Dorsey and Fisher stand parallel on the stage, slightly hunched and facing stage left, looking down at their hands as the voiceover reads: "I wish I could grow a mustache." After that, the young boy bemoans "a new constellation of zits" appearing on his face on school picture day. These are all experiences that are familiar to both adolescent boys and trans men of all ages. The pursuit of medical transition, particularly Hormone Replacement Therapy for trans men, is often likened to a second puberty, as adults often feel the same effects as young men going through biologically-induced puberty for the first time. The desire for facial hair and excitement at its first showing, acne, and voice changes are a few of the many symptoms that are shared between cis boys and trans men. References to these symptoms are strategically scaffolded in "Lost/Found:" first, an entry that references the biology of the cis boy (his "nuts") which

he fears metaphorically losing for lack of use; then, the desire for a physical marker of masculinity (the mustache) and the envy at another who has already gained it; and the unfortunate consequence (acne) which comes along with the necessary chemicals to turn one into a man.

Soon after, Todd (the young boy's friend with the enviable mustache) has sex for the first time, and the Boy is rejected by a girl he attempts to ask out. This leads him into a barrage of inwardly focused disparagement: "I can't do anything without feeling like I will totally freak out or fuck up. I feel like something wrong is happening or like something that should be happening isn't." Dorsey stops mirroring Fisher at this moment and watches him as he moves morosely downstage. He attempts to connect with him, placing a hand on his arm, but it is shrugged off. The two quickly commence their mirroring duet as the voiceover reads: "Something is definitely wrong with me." Once again, Dorsey creates commentary here on the role of the autobiographical for trans people. However, unlike Stone's highlighting of the trans autobiographical archive, Dorsey here reflects on the ways in which the autobiography of a young cisgender boy serves as a roadmap for the young trans male experience. But the boy's diary fails to deliver, as the voiceover asserts: "Yeah, I'm looking for a boyhood role model. You know, all budding macho tendencies, breakouts of latent masculine energy, and puppy dog tails. And I get an insecure nerd with a crush on George Michael." Dorsey and Fisher mirror again, with stereotypical poses of Olympian maleness, with biceps flexed and calves tensed in a lunge. As the voiceover begins to disparage the boy, Fisher then breaks into the Running Man, eliciting a laugh from the audience. The voiceover describes

looking back at the Diary for a Young Girl and seeing numerous entries "dedicated to George Michael," as well as to Dorsey's own insecurities and doubts.

The young boy's diary fails to deliver for Dorsey in a few different ways. Initially, Dorsey is disappointed that there are "no secrets of the sexes revealed," meaning that he does not find any insight into what makes a boy or a girl that he can latch onto to guide him into manhood. Then, when it comes to the individual experiences of the young boy whose diary he finds, the author is revealed to not even be an expert on boyhood himself. He fails to live up to the image of idealized masculinity that Dorsey holds in his mind, due to a variety of factors: he is not (hetero)sexually potent, he is not confident, and he longs for the same markings of manhood for which Dorsey himself longs. Rather than finding an example of what he should aspire to be, the boy's diary ends up supporting Dorsey's gender identity because of the ways in which both Dorsey and the boy struggle to meet the expectations of hegemonic masculinity.

"Lost/Found" plays with time and autobiography as well. When Dorsey writes in his own diary, he is a child. When he finds the young boy's diary, he is an adult in his 20's. Yet, he seeks guidance in the diary's entries, despite knowing that the author was, himself, a child when he wrote in it. In the diary, Dorsey seeks a way to reconcile his past with truths about an upbringing that he never knew, and he does so by reaching out to a boyhood that is preserved in the past. It is as though reading the diary of a boy who was in his adolescence at the same time as Dorsey is a form of soothing his past self or his inner child, imagining both what he could have been like in this boy's shoes and what it may have been like to have a boy after which to model himself when he was that age.

Dorsey then reveals that, after the entry about George Michael, the boy left the rest of the diary empty, and Dorsey has taken it upon himself to fill the rest of the diary by writing an entry every year on his birthday. “So far, I have written in this boy’s diary for ten birthdays,” Dorsey’s voiceover says, “which I guess makes me now a 10 year old boy.” Dorsey and Fisher commence their duet once again, but this time, Dorsey is further downstage than Fisher. He is more prominently displayed, indicating, perhaps, that he has taken his place as the Young Boy for which the diary was made.

In “Lou,” the audience experiences the autobiographical writings of a trans man, read aloud by another trans man, who is also the choreographer and lead dancer of the performance piece being enacted on stage as the recordings of the diary entries are played overhead. Dorsey never attempts to convince us that he is ‘Lou.’ Audiences are not encouraged to suspend their disbelief the way that they are when an actor portrays a character on stage in a play. Further, Dorsey does not attempt to imitate or re-create Sullivan’s image or likeness in his performance, for example, as an actor portrays lawyer Roy Cohn in a performance of *Angels in America*.

This is where *Uncovered* engages in the disruptive work Hesford describes above. In seeing Dorsey perform to Lou’s words, the audience experiences Lou’s thoughts while also experiencing Dorsey’s voice and body. If the autobiographical text is equivalent in subject representation as physical presence and sensory experience, then the audience is witnessing two different trans men, existing in separate times with separate experiences but very much real in their own respects. One need not know autobiographical information about Dorsey to believe that Dorsey and Sullivan are two members of the

same demographic group who are different people with different experiences. By using the autobiographical material of a trans man, Dorsey also fractures the myth of the singular trans experience.

Dorsey and Sullivan's stories meet during a scene roughly halfway through the performance. Here, Dorsey reads a section of Sullivan's diary which documents his feelings before and after beginning his transition. Over the loudspeaker, Dorsey's voice reads Sullivan's words:

> Dear Diary, I want to look like what I am, but I don't know what someone like me looks like. I mean, when people look at me, I want them to think, "There's one of those people who has their own interpretation of happiness." That's what I am. I've spent years in libraries going through everything I can find, wondering if there was anybody who felt the way I did. And I couldn't find anything, anything. Years of this wondering, not validated by anybody. Alone. Hidden from view, I am losing touch. Serious, threatening, sad, ferocious, stormy, overwhelming, lost world. But, I still yearn for that happiness. I look in the mirror and say to myself, "That's you? That girl over there is you?" My voice and my body betray me. I mean, no one looks deeper than the flesh, do they? Do they? So, practice being invisible. Learn to look in the mirror and see only the mirror.

On stage, Dorsey begins this section of choreography alone. At the mention of the mirror, Dorsey moves to a spotlight fixed downstage center and looks out into the audience. The fourth wall framed by the proscenium becomes the mirror into which Sullivan is looking and Dorsey performs the action of gazing into the mirror with his own body.

An initial analysis of this moment suggests a message of Everyman-ness from Dorsey to his audience. If he looks out into the audience and sees a reflection of himself, then perhaps he and his audience are not so different after all. However, accompanied by Sullivan's text, the initial look in/through the proscenium mirror represents Sullivan's

disappointment at the reflection that he sees in the mirror and the implication that this reflection does not accurately portray the person that he knows himself to be: “I want to look like what I am [...] I look in the mirror and say to myself, ‘That’s you?’ [...] My voice and my body betray me [...] no one looks deeper than the flesh, do they? [...] So, practice being invisible. Learn to look in the mirror and see only the mirror.”

In the lives of many trans people, mirrors, much like autobiographies, play a contentious but important role. The mirror is often a source of tension for a trans person, as our reflections are often a major trigger for gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia. Conversely, the mirror can be a source of “limitless joy” when one is experiencing a moment of “gender euphoria.” In the contemporary millennial generation of trans media, the “audience as mirror” arises in the popular genre of transition vlogs posted on public video hosting sites such as YouTube. Many trans people, often young, use scheduled video confessionals to track their “progress” of transition once they begin HRT. The use of video recording is beneficial for tracking physical changes that are both visual and (mostly for FTM trans people) aural - in fact, many doctors now suggest that their patients document their transition using photography and video recording. The publishing of these vlogs, making them accessible to the general public, fulfills two metaphorical purposes within the scope of this analysis: the common practice of autobiographical work as a roadmap for others and the positioning of the audience as a mirror.

Analyzing the work of artist Lillian Mulero, Hesford suggests that Mulero’s paintings that are labeled as mirrors “set an unavoidable trap […] where the visible is made invisible in order to reflect what is not seen” (xii). When the viewer is told they are

looking at a mirror which does not fulfill the purpose ascribed to a mirror (a surface that reflects what is in front of it), the "frames" (social, historical, legal, etc. contexts) which construct the lenses through which we perceive and experience life are exposed. If this painting is labeled as a mirror, who is the viewer to say that it is not? Is it possible that the painting is a mirror according to the artist? Perhaps it was what the artist saw in a mirror, a reflection that served as the subject of a still life. Or, more existentially abstract, if a mirror is defined by its ability to reflect, perhaps the artist chooses what the painting reflects.

There is a presumption here, too, that the inability for the viewer to see themself in the art precludes the painting from being a mirror. The complication of this contradiction, Hesford argues, means that these "mirrors" also reveal the frame of *language,* which is often invisible because it is so ubiquitous. By calling a painting a "mirror," Hesford claims that Mulero reminds us that the language we use to identify and describe things is arbitrary. What stops a painting from being a mirror? Is a mirror only a surface in which we can see the immediate reflection of our physical surroundings? Is a mirror only defined by its relationship to whoever is experiencing it? Can a painting be both a mirror and/or a painting, depending on who is looking at it?

The proscenium arch as mirror frame also recalls the oft-quoted adage about theater's role in society originally spoken by German director Bertolt Brecht: "Theater is not a mirror to reflect society, but a hammer with which to shape it." Brecht spoke these words to support the burgeoning postmodern theatrical movement, in contrast to Realism, spearheaded and popularized by Stanislavski's method acting. Dorsey, whether

intentionally or not, pays tribute to Brecht's words by staring out past the fourth wall, performing as though he can see his own reflection as he looks out into the house. But rather than the performance reflecting the lives of the audience members, the performer can see his own reflection when he looks out at the audience. Circling back to Hesford's arguments about Mulero's mirrors and the artifice of language, does theater have to choose between being a mirror that reflects or a hammer that shapes? Are the two functions of these objects mutually exclusive; can performance be a mirror that shapes the world in which it is created while also (or, potentially, by) reflecting it back to its audiences?

For Dorsey to look out into the audience when looking at the mirror touches on the external forces at work in Sullivan's dysphoria. Sullivan does not see who he truly is in the mirror when he looks at it because he sees what he thinks other people will not recognize as a man. He sees the body that he possesses, which is a man's body because he is a man. But he does not believe that it is his body because he has notions of what a man's body is supposed to be and his body does not fit those definitions. Sullivan's encouragement to himself to be invisible is the result of the inability to imagine what he is because he has no models of trans masculinity or manhood upon which to build his own image. Therefore, he must become that which cannot be seen by others, in order to keep himself safe from both internal and external scrutiny and harm.

It is the audience, then, that acts as the mirror. Rather than art objects which claim the label of "mirror" despite not fulfilling the mirror's traditional function for the viewer, such as in Mulero's paintings, in *Uncovered,* the audience members bear the label of the

mirror themselves. Echoing through the theater are Sullivan's ruminations on his relationship to his reflection as Dorsey's body faces the audience and places them in the position of the voyeur. In this moment, Dorsey physically manifests Sullivan's personal thoughts that he is only able to see himself to the extent that other people can see him. Dorsey stands at the end of the stage and draws the audience's attention to him. The audience is the mirror. Their eyes on him are the eyes through which he sees the reflection of his body; their perception of him is what he sees when he looks in the mirror.

When Sullivan claims that "no one looks deeper than the flesh," Dorsey turns the moment into a direct implication of the audience as they play the role of the mirror, staring at his body from the house. Here, it is crucial that Dorsey's performance is done live. His gaze into the audience challenges each person to consider how their perceptions and preconceived notions about trans people directly affect someone who is standing right in front of them. The immediacy of that confrontation is unattainable in other mediums such as literature or film. It is a challenge to the audience to consider the ways that they participate in or perpetuate transphobia by the ways that they make assumptions about others based on what they see and how it matches up with traditional social and cultural cues about identity.

However, Dorsey also gives the audience the chance to see "deeper than the flesh." By presenting Sullivan's journal writings, Dorsey offers the audience a look beyond his own body, beyond the details of Sullivan's transition, and into both his and Sullivan's deepest thoughts. There is a vulnerable intimacy in keeping a journal. We

understand those pages to typically be private; a place where the writer can keep the thoughts, feelings, and ideas for their own eyes only. But by donating them into the public archive, Sullivan indicated that he wanted others to be able to read his innermost thoughts. And since the diaries were donated and made available posthumously, *The Diary Project* gives audiences the opportunity to experience the depths of Lou Sullivan's inner thoughts that people who were alive alongside him might not ever have been able to access. Likewise, "Lost/Found" gives us a glimpse into Dorsey's private diaries as well. In doing so, Dorsey uses the autobiographical, both his own and Sullivan's, to present multiple three-dimensional representations of transness for his audience.

Dorsey is then joined on stage by ensemble member Brian Fisher. Fisher is dressed entirely in black, shrouding him in shadow that makes him almost vanish against the rest of the stage. He stands behind Dorsey for a moment before the two begin a duet as the voiceover continues:

> See only the person there that I imagine myself to be. Then make this change. Take the next step. You are the beauty that you create, Lou. I think of myself as two people finally coming together, in peace with each other. And of my other half, I say, "Nobody loves me, but me adores you." I am positive I want to do this, this change, my own body. This limitless joy. Imagine, I'm finally going to be able to look in the mirror and see the person there that I imagine myself to be. And my heart was beating a million miles an hour, catching my breath. He asked if I was scared and I said, "Just the opposite." Afraid for so long, I know now, I can do anything. I can be anything. Exactly who I am.

This is the second time in the performance that Fisher and Dorsey are on stage alone together. The first was for "Lost/Found," where the two wore identical outfits to portray the authors of the two diaries for young people – two separate individuals separated by

time and space, two "awkward nerds with a crush on George Michael" sharing the same existential yearning for an understanding of manhood without knowing one another. However, in this section, Fisher blends into the background while Dorsey wears the brown top and white pants that make him stand out against the black of the stage and backdrop. Their duet has a different energy. The choreography in "Lost/Found" involved the two mirroring one another, suggesting two people on the same path moving at similar yet different paces. In "Lou," the two are more integrated. After Fisher joins Dorsey on stage, the two lean slightly to the right in tandem before Fisher's arm slides around Dorsey's waist. Dorsey raises his right arm and then makes a motion to dive to the right, lifting his legs, and Fisher's left arm joins his right and holds Dorsey in the air. It is a tender hold, not a lift that showcases Fisher's strength or Dorsey's poise (though it does both), but a moment of trust between the two dancers.

Instead of portraying a separate entity which Dorsey's character seeks to imitate, Fisher portrays the other version of Sullivan that he references in the voiceover – the other half of the "two people finally coming together in peace." This is reflected in the choreography as Dorsey and Fisher embrace, touching their foreheads together softly as that line is read over the speakers. As Sullivan says, "You are the beauty that you create, Lou," Dorsey touches Fisher's cheek and presses his hand to Fisher's heart. "Nobody loves me, but me adores you" brings the two together in the formation of a waltz, and Fisher's face displays the hint of smile as the two come together and he places his hands on Dorsey's waist, to lead him in the next steps. Fisher, then, represents what Sullivan

imagines himself to be. As a cis man, Fisher has the body that Sullivan sees when he imagines what a man looks like.

It would be simple to suggest, then, that this moment reinforces ideals of normativity in gender expression. To place Fisher as the ideal self to which trans men aspire would suggest a cisnormativity to trans ideological selfhood. However, the choice to costume him in black is significant, particularly against a black painted stage and black backdrop. If he were meant to represent another version of Sullivan, he would be costumed the same as Dorsey. But instead, he fades into the background, and as he lifts Dorsey up or is caressed by Dorsey's hands, it seems as though Dorsey interacts with a ghost or a gust of wind. If Dorsey is staring into the mirror when he looks out from the stage and into the house, then Fisher standing behind him, peering over his shoulder is the reflection that he thinks that he should see; but his actual body, the corporeal form that he actually inhabits, stands in the way of him seeing what he believes he should see. What Fisher represents here, rather than a truly additional Sullivan, is the imagined future that Sullivan creates for himself in his head. It is this imagined body that propels Sullivan forward, to "take the next step," inspiring him that he can be "the beauty that you create, Lou."

Fisher as the imaginary manhood that Sullivan envisions for himself is solidified further as he and Dorsey step into the spotlight downstage center once more. The choreography slows to almost complete stillness, back to the positioning from when Fisher first came onto the stage: Dorsey staring out into the audience, into the mirror of the fourth wall, while Fisher stands behind him, focused on Dorsey's face as best he can

from behind him. The voiceover reads: “Afraid for so long, I know now, I can do anything. I can be anything. Exactly who I am.” Fisher’s hands come to Dorsey’s hips and both men grasp the bottom of Dorsey’s shirt. Once it’s removed, Dorsey holds the crumpled shirt in one hand while the other rests on his flat chest. Behind him, Fisher smiles, then rests his face on the back of Dorsey’s neck, out of view, as the lights come down. The imagined self no longer needs to exist, because Sullivan has taken the steps necessary to fulfill that imagined self within his own body. As Dorsey says at the end of “Lost/Found,” writing his annual birthday entry to fill up the pages that the original author left empty, “It’s at the times when we can’t see anything, when we are the most unsure or unsettled about ourselves, when we are lost, that we strike matches in the dark, looking around for who we should be like next. But it’s us. It’s always just us.”

CONCLUSION

As he stares out into the audience, Dorsey’s chest heaves with breaths labored by his dancing. The duet with Fisher represents not only a dance of the body as it exists alongside the imagined self that the body feels it should be, but also the virtuosity and labor that it takes to wrestle with the notion that one’s body is not the body that it should be. The performance of choreography and the performance of gender are not dissimilar from one another. There are “constants” which are rooted in learned techniques and disciplines which, when executed with meaning, constitute the artform of gender identity and expression. The weariness of Dorsey’s body, the rise and fall of his chest as he catches his breath, is a physiological response to the work he has just done that also

represents the work that he, and all of us, are constantly doing in order to survive within the rigid system of gendered expectations.

Dorsey deftly uses the form of concert dance to present the autobiographical story of one of his transcestors. He weaves into the performance pieces of his own autobiographical tale, thereby presenting us with his own past that looks toward the present moment as its future; a future that his historical subject does not get to experience. By using Sullivan's diary entries to create his choreography, Dorsey brings a written account of a trans life into the embodied realm of live performance.

Chapter Five: The Autobiographical Assumption in *TRANSom*

When I first set out on this journey of this project, I knew that I wanted to highlight trans artists who were making work that felt impactful to me. I believe in the power and presence of the archive and I wanted to honor the work being done by the brave and brilliant trans artists who are daring to put their work out into the world right now. However, I knew that in addition to writing about existing work, I also had a hunger to create something with the knowledge that I was gaining and generating through my analyses. My goal was to take what I learned from the artists in my case studies and produce a new performance that synthesized or processed the lessons I was receiving from the work I witnessed. On August 15, 2019, my own dream deferred, to quote Shakina Nayfack, came true when the lights came up for the world premiere of *TRANSom*.

Almost exactly a year earlier, in August 2018, I received an email from a friend and talented theatermaker, Dillon Yruegas, stating that a local theater was looking for trans artists to collaborate on a devised piece about the trans experience. Initially, I was skeptical. In my experience, when a call is sent out looking for trans actors, the creators are usually cis people with little to no training on how to create a safe and conscious space for trans cast members. The roles for trans actors in these productions are usually minor characters created to add some diversity to the cast of characters, where their trans identity is the only remarkable thing about them; or, they are part of a production that is about trans people with a distinctly documentarian lens which asks the performers to bring their personal experiences to the table for creative fodder. I was not interested in

being involved in either of these types of productions. I have participated in more than one of these types of performances, in capacities as a performer as well as a dramaturg. However, when Yruegas specified that the theater's artistic director, Lisa Scheps, was a trans woman herself, my interest was piqued. It felt as though everything was falling into place.

Over the course of a 12-month devising and rehearsal process, I and a group of brilliant creative collaborators created a 75-minute play titled *TRANSom*, a pun based on the architectural term for the space between the window and door in the front of a house. The play premiered on August 15th, 2019 at Ground Floor Theater and ran for 12 performances. Though we used autobiographical material in our devising process, the play was not autobiographical. None of the characters were meant to represent any of the ensemble members, nor did any actors play characters who were based on themselves. However, despite this fact, many audience members made the assumption that the characters and their storylines were based on the personal experiences of the actors. To an extreme degree, some believed that the actors shared the life experiences and identities of their characters, as though we were all playing dramatized versions of our own selves.

In this chapter, I will parse out why I believe that audience members came to this conclusion with a theory that I name the "autobiographical assumption," based on Viviane Namaste's "autobiographical imperative." As has been mentioned previously, the "imperative" that Namaste names is in reference to the way in which trans people are expected to offer their autobiographical narrative on demand to curious cisgender audiences without any regard for their privacy, dignity, or autonomy. Using *TRANSom* as

an exemplary case study, I offer that there exists in conjunction with the autobiographical imperative an autobiographical *assumption* whereby, due to the prevailing notion of the autobiographical imperative, trans people are assumed to be delivering autobiographical information in all instances where they speak on trans-related subject matter. I posit that this is in part due to the ubiquity of autobiographical and biographical work by or about trans subjects thereby leaving audience members with little to no references for trans-centric work that is not based on personal narratives. Equally as responsible for the assumption in our performances are the ways in which the production referenced the pervasive trend of trans autobiography in a way that was intended to be a form of intra-community communication and meta-commentary.

To this end, I focus much of my analysis on Max, the character that I developed most closely and the role which I originated in the production. Max is a trans man in his mid-twenties who has made a career as a content creator on YouTube, where he documents his life for public consumption. Max's character and career are based on a real community of trans people who document their transition journeys on YouTube. These videos often become touchstones and guideposts for young trans people who are navigating their own journeys of self-discovery and medical transition, in much the same way as the written autobiographies that make up the "autobiographical files" referenced by Sandy Stone. Through my analysis of Max's character and the ways that the production incorporated his videos throughout the performance, I argue that the inclusion of

this character both contributed to and complicated the autobiographical assumptions made by the audience.

CREATING *TRANSOM*

TRANSom follows the story of Sandy Ellner, a trans woman who has, alongside her wife, Carolyn, devoted her life to maintaining a cooperative housing structure for younger trans people in need of support and shelter. Sandy's home is also home to five younger trans people: Jordan, Max, Bastion, Margo/MG, and Laur who arrives halfway through the play as a new resident. At the beginning of the play, Carolyn and Sandy find themselves at odds over two central conflicts: the equitable sharing of responsibilities in the house and a mysterious illness for which Sandy is reluctant to seek medical attention. Both of these conflicts come to a head toward the middle of the play when the dishwasher, which Bastion claims to have repaired, explodes and spews detergent bubbles all over the kitchen and dining room, followed by a party for Margo at which Sandy reveals that she's been diagnosed with Stage 4 pancreatic cancer. After Sandy's diagnosis, Carolyn begins the difficult task of determining what to do with the house when her wife has passed, and ultimately decides that the two of them need to be left alone in order for Sandy to heal. The younger residents, led by Jordan, scramble to find a new place to live, but commit to continuing Sandy's work by opening their new space as a nonprofit dedicated to helping young trans people in need, aptly named "Sandy's House."

From the first day of discussion about the show, Lisa made it clear that she wanted to create a play with characters and a narrative arc. She was not interested in making *The Vagina Monologues* for trans people. She wanted structure and plot, rising action and climax, and three-dimensional characters that our actors could explore and embody throughout the course of a full-length performance. But equally as important to both of us was the notion that the play would resonate with other trans people, and we were entirely disinterested in a performance created with the intention of getting cis people "up to speed" on trans issues. Our play would not be an after-school special about the perils of being trans, rife with teachable moments for cis people to ruminate on as they left the building at the end of the night.

On the contrary, what we wanted to create was something that resonated with and spoke to ourselves and our community. Rather than create a space in which cis people felt welcomed and catered to, we hoped to create a space that was tailored to trans people, into which cis people were also invited. We wanted to portray both the joys and dilemmas of trans life in a way that felt relatable to our trans audience, not a spectacle of tragedy or uncritical celebration. Some of the first questions that we asked of each other at our first meeting were: What do *we* want to see on stage? What kind of experience do *we* want to have as artists? And what experience do we want the *trans people* in our audience to have?

These questions served as somewhat of a north star for us as we developed the piece. They came from our desire to create something that, above all else, felt impactful and important for the trans people in the room. Our intention was to challenge the types

of performances and media that we have become accustomed to, that which uses our existence not to benefit our own community but for the education or entertainment of other people.

As the process developed and I took on the role of co-director, much of my work in the rehearsal room was to lead devising exercises. We embarked on our devising process from a deeply personal place. After our first meeting, we decided to use some of our own autobiographical material as a springboard for inspiration and made selections from our personal archives to bring to the next gathering. Here, we shared with one another a range of creative work that depicted our own journeys as trans people in the world. I read entries from the journal I kept in college, stream of consciousness narratives of the anxiety I felt trying to figure out my identity, then attempting to socially transition on campus.

In addition to sharing personal narratives, we returned to our central guiding questions and discussed the types of characters and relationships that we wanted to depict in the play. Many of these were depictions of identities that resonated with our own, such as wanting to see trans people at various stages of medical transition, or of a certain age or racial identity. We also discussed relationship dynamics and scenarios that we were interested in seeing on stage regardless of if they applied to our own experiences. This included things like trans people of an older age in romantic relationships, intimate platonic relationships, relationships to the spiritual world, and an emphasis on the importance of having a chosen family -- all of which ended up fundamentally shaping our

final product. By the end of this process, we ended up with the following cast of characters:

> SANDY, trans woman, the matriarch of the house who has spent her years post-transition as a community activist (played by Lisa Scheps*);
>
> CAROLYN, trans woman, Sandy's wife and a lawyer with a more conservative worldview than Sandy (played by Alyssa Thompson);
>
> JORDAN, nonbinary, a recovering addict and Sandy's neurotic protege (played by Adrian Clark);
>
> BASTION, nonbinary, a spiritualist who seems plucked right out of the fields of flower children from the 60s (played by Ozma Darling);
>
> MARGO/MG, nonbinary, a prize-winning poet/academic who parties as hard as they work (played by siri gurudev*);
>
> MAX, trans man, a popular personality on YouTube where he boisterously documents his everyday life (played by Jess O'Rear*);
>
> LAUR, nonbinary, a high school student who comes to Sandy's door after they are kicked out of their home for being trans (played by Elian Sweeten*)

In the list above, an asterisk indicates a cast member who was part of the original devising group beginning in August 2018 (Elian, Lisa, siri, and myself). The remaining ensemble members (Alyssa, Adrian, and Ozma) were cast through an audition process in March 2019 and participated in the devising and script-building process from April-August 2019.

Once we had the full cast, we began the second phase of our devising process. During this time, each ensemble member was responsible for developing their character during the devising process. In complete opposition to the autobiographical, many of my goals in the ways I built the devising process was to encourage the actors to keep a

healthy disconnect from their characters. As such, I would begin every rehearsal with a check-in exercise called “Pack It or Trash It.” In this exercise, the ensemble would circle up around two imaginary structures: a suitcase and a dumpster, both of which I would open the exercise by pantomiming my carrying and pushing into the space. The group would then take turns sharing with one another something that brought them joy from their previous week, followed by anything that was weighing on their minds or in their bodies. Everyone was instructed to take their heavy or distracting thoughts and feelings and decide to do one of these two things: pack it in the suitcase until after rehearsal or throw it in the dumpster and get rid of it for good. The actors were encouraged to act out these decisions with the imaginary dumpster or suitcase as a way of releasing the tension and weight associated with the emotions they held in their bodies.

This warm-up gave the group the chance to connect with one another around our experiences, engaged our bodies in a way that prepared us to physically manifest our characters, and freed up space within our minds and bodies for the work we had to do. While the exercise asks its participants to share personal narratives with one another, the intention is to de-center one’s own experiences. It was, at its best, an opportunity for catharsis which strengthened our bonds as an ensemble and provided relief for each of us to release the pressures and worries of our real lives and step, unencumbered, into the world which we were creating together.

After each exercise, the group would circle up to discuss what new discoveries we had each made about our characters, what changes we thought might need to be made, and what we felt like needed more attention. Then, as directors, Lisa and I would note

down what stuck out to us as material we wanted to keep or found interesting. Once a week, we would meet with our writers to pass on what we had learned in rehearsal and discuss script edits. Occasionally, they would produce pages of dialogue for us to bring back to the next week's rehearsal, which we would then workshop with the cast.

In June 2019, when the first full script draft was complete, we held an invited readthrough with some local artists to incorporate third-party feedback. We invited both cis and trans people, some performers and some playwrights and some folks with no affiliation to theater or performance at all. Our goal with the public reading was to make sure that the script was technically coherent, with a cohesive series of events and clear character development. But we also wanted to make sure that the story and its characters resonated with our own community. Overwhelmingly, this feedback was positive and constructive. However, one comment that we received from a cis respondent was that they wanted to hear more of the characters' backstories. They did not ask specifically for details on the characters' transitions, but they expressed that they felt as though there was a sense that the characters only existed in relation to the current moment. This respondent felt that they did not have a context for what the characters' lives were like before living in Sandy's house and what brought them to live in this kind of housing structure.

Initially, my response to this feedback was hostile. I expressed in the subsequent meeting with our writers that I did not want to delve into our characters' backstories because that is precisely the kind of information that cis people crave when hearing our stories. I rebuked this respondent's curiosity and urged the rest of the team away from adding more character background material into the script. My volatile reaction to this

comment stemmed from my innate understanding of the autobiographical imperative. To me, this respondent was asking for a snapshot of "before" for our characters so that they could compare it to the "after" of the present moment. Ultimately, we did not respond to the feedback by making any character's backstory more explicit or revealing more information about a character than we had originally intended. Instead, we strengthened the bonds between the characters in the current moment, using character backstories as a foundation for character actions in the present.

It was vitally important to me that even though our characters were entirely fictional, we did not indulge the autobiographical imperative with them. I refused to allow any moments in the play which would read to the audience as revealing a character's past. As Namaste argues, focusing on the autobiographical, on the history of one's body in a sensationalist way, distracts from the material reality of the present and the vastness of the subject's identity and existence. Eschewing the autobiographical imperative was one of my central intentions with the characters and stories in *TRANSom*.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ASSUMPTION

While the devising process drew inspiration from the ensemble's personal experiences, *TRANSom* is in no way an autobiographical play. Almost none of the autobiographical material that was brought into the rehearsal room made its way into the script. The characters and plot events are entirely fictional. Yet, reviewers and audience members alike assumed that the stories were ours. In the only review that the production received, the author wrote that Lisa and I, as directors, "[brought] together the stories of

cast members' many paths through life and [crafted] them into a smooth, coherent narrative."[7] Many audience members approached and asked me, upon meeting me in the lobby, if Max's YouTube channel was real and if they could follow it. The audience presumed that the stories told in the performance were our personal stories as cast members. Many of them failed to understand that the characters were simply that: fictional characters that we created. Despite knowing that I was an actor, as well as the co-director of the production, audience members assumed that I was playing a version of myself with a different name. I argue that this is due to "the autobiographical assumption" – a direct consequence of the autobiographical imperative.

In describing her conception of the autobiographical imperative, Namaste recalls her own experiences as a writer and journalist being rejected for pitching stories about anti-trans legislation, instances of discrimination, or simply a review of a trans-centric performance because the publisher wanted her to talk about her personal experiences with transition. The information that she offered and the knowledge that she attempted to produce was eschewed in favor of her autobiographical narrative, and clearly the publisher not only had an insatiable curiosity for this information, but felt confident that she would be willing to share that information with a public audience of strangers. The term "imperative" claims that to cis people, a trans person's autobiography is the most pertinent information that they can make available, and the request for that information is a demand that comes with authority. The system of cissexism dictates a hierarchy wherein trans people are expected to be at the mercy of cis people, acquiescing to their

[7] From "Review: TRANSom by Ground Floor Theater" by David Glen Robinson for CTXLiveTheatre.com

desires and whims at a moment's notice without any consideration of the trans person's own safety, comfort, and boundaries.

While creating *TRANSom*, we made a conscious effort to avoid giving in to the autobiographical imperative. There are a few references to characters pursuing medical and social transition, but at no point in the script does anyone discuss the details of their decision or situation. Characters are never depicted performing any actions related to social or medical transition, such as getting dressed or preparing a syringe for a hormone injection. Sandy's diagnosis of pancreatic cancer was chosen in order to avoid having to discuss any parts of her body that could be associated with biological sex characteristics. This was part of our mission to deliver a performance that resonated with trans audiences, rather than catering to uninformed cis audiences.

Even the name of the show was chosen to highlight the protected space of the stage and script for our trans actors. Historically, before the advent of air conditioning, transom windows were installed in homes to let air pass through the main corridors without compromising the family's privacy or security. The windows were small and elevated above the door frame, outside of the visual range or reach of passing strangers. The "transom" by definition is the structural crossbeam that sustains the architecture of the transom window and the front door. *TRANSom* is the frame that supports the window of the fourth wall, constructed as such to protect the privacy and security of those inside of it by offering a glimpse into their lives without compromising their safety or comfort.

The presumption of autobiography when considering art created about trans people has clouded the audience's ability to understand that our performances were

fictional and that we were not presenting them with our own stories within a fictitious narrative Many audience members asked what our process of creation was like and seemed to have a genuinely deep interest in hearing the answer. Combined with the fact that we did not advertise the piece as a play written by an author but, instead, co-created by the ensemble, the audience's preconceived notions of trans-centric art precluded any additional information they may have gathered about the production as a work of fiction.

In addition to the acknowledgment of the devised and ensemble-driven process of creating the show, the identities of the performers were used in the marketing materials as well. By placing our trans/non-binary identities in front of the audience before they even arrived at the theater, we offered them autobiographical information about ourselves. In the same (singular) review mentioned earlier, the author also points out that our having an all-trans cast "may seem like a novelty, but it renders the play's authenticity unquestionable." For this author, a cisgender man, a group of trans people performing a play about trans characters communicates that the audience can expect to be given an accurate and trustworthy representation of transgender life.

For a chapter in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility,* Tavia Nyong'o moderated an online roundtable discussion titled "Representation and Its Limits." During this discussion, performer Geo Wyeth spoke the following regarding the ephemeral nature of the self in relationship to representation:

> The self, to me, seems to be a roving ghost of desire, necessity, circumstance, and reception, which may or may not always be explicit, depending on where one is. I

> am how I am seen or viewed by others. But if I am Black or I am trans, and if people can't see that, then what am I? Sometimes it's hard to distinguish the difference between the self we hold inside of us and the self that is named by others. We become 'visible' on our own terms, perhaps in order to eliminate the control that someone else's gaze has. The problem is that once I become visible through naming myself, I become an image. (Nyong'o 192-193)

Here, Wyeth grapples with the tension between what is known and felt within oneself and the external perception of the self by others. His comments suggest the complicated and cyclical relationship between presentation, re-presentation, and the repetition of the performative. As Butler's concept of gender performativity states, gender is performative insofar as it is a repeatable and repetitive set of actions which, through being repeated, becomes inscribed and re-inscribed. But so much of the performative theory of gender is reliant on the external perception and reception, and Butler came under much scrutiny for her theory because of its alleged discounting of the internal sense of the self.

In this conversation about visibility, Wyeth deftly acknowledges that the internal and external senses of self are not mutually exclusive but, in fact, interact with one another to define our sense of self. The repeated question of whether gender identity is influenced by nature or nurture, by something physiological or something social, is answerable by Wyeth's question: "If I am Black and I am trans, and people can't see that, then what am I?" Wyeth does not become less of who he is by others being unable to recognize those aspects of himself, but his identity comes differently contextualized depending on the atmosphere in which he finds himself.

For example: if I pass by you on the street and you perceive me to be a cisgender man, I do not cease to be trans. The realities of my material existence do not disappear

without their acknowledgment. However, the social consequences of my material existence will change. By being perceived as a cisgender man, I will be treated differently than if I was perceived as a transgender man. If I am perceived as cisgender, I can move more safely through social spaces without fear of discrimination and do things such as use a public men's restroom with a lower risk of violence. Gender expression plays a role in this as well. If I am perceived as a *feminine* cisgender man, I will be treated differently than if I am perceived as masculine, and my risk factors in social situations will escalate.

Circling back to Wyeth's consideration of the self in relationship to the representational, he makes another cogent point: "Once I become visible through naming myself, I become an image" (193). Here, Wyeth acknowledges the complexity of being recognizable, particularly as a member of a marginalized group, and the consequences of representational visibility. By naming oneself, we become visible in a way that we were not previously. Wyeth's specific use of the word "image" is striking and powerful. He does not speak to subjecthood or suggest that naming imparts upon us a sense of agency. Rather, what he acknowledges is that visibility through language creates something upon which to be looked. If we look to the dictionary definition of an "image," Merriam-Webster offers nine separate definitions which all allude to the same central point: an image is not the thing itself, but a visual presentation of a thing. Therefore, when Wyeth claims that naming oneself initiates the process of "[becoming] an image," he references that one also becomes something which becomes representational. By being recognized as a trans man, I become an image of a trans man, which can be referenced against other

images of trans men either in person or through the media, and against which other images of trans men can be referenced in return.

Furthermore, the word "image" implies not just something to be looked at but also something which can be cross-referenced against the viewer's prior knowledge of the thing represented by the image. "Imagery" in a literary sense refers to descriptive language which conjures sensory recognition within the reader. The strongest imagery is that which engages the reader's imagination by using language that is familiar to provoke the senses. Imagery which does not resonate with the reader's understanding of the world will be unsuccessful. If an author describes a sight or smell or taste of something that the reader cannot recall, then the reader will be unable to imagine what is being described. As such, becoming an image also suggests becoming subject to the viewer's interpretation of what they see, which will be influenced and limited by the extent of the viewer's prior knowledge and experience.

When we named ourselves as an ensemble of all trans and non-binary artists, every member of the cast became an image. Even the show itself became the image of a trans-centric show. Looking at the current and past media and performance landscape, there are no references for productions in television, film, or theater which feature a cast entirely of trans characters that are not autobiographical or based on real life events. Therefore, the audiences of *TRANSom* had nothing against which to gauge our image of a play created by trans people featuring trans characters and trans actors.

What also occurs here is the particular space that marginalized artists are expected to take up when creating artistic work. Marginalized artists are often expected to work

autobiographically because our work is often defined by our identity markers whether we intend it to be or not. We made the choice to market *TRANSom* using the fact that we were an all-trans ensemble because it was important to emphasize that trans people were involved in all aspects of the production, not just the talent on stage. But it leads me to wonder to what extent centering the performers' identities before audiences even entered the theater contributed to a misconception about how central the performers' selves would be present on stage?

WHAT IS A "TRANS PLAY?"

In discussing Wyeth's arguments surrounding the self and representation, I suggested that because there are few examples of trans-centric pieces of performance that are not autobiographical or in some way based on real life events and people, that a fictionalized narrative centering trans characters was difficult for audiences to understand. Additionally, while Deirdre Heddon argues in *Autobiography and Performance* that there is an "autobiographical nature to everything," she nevertheless places boundaries around how she conceives of an autobiographical performance for the sake of her text. Therefore, while I am categorizing *TRANSom* outside of the genre of an "autobiographical performance," I feel it is important to acknowledge that to act as though there is nothing autobiographical about it would be to dismiss the resonate impact of feminist theory which has astutely and vitally acknowledged that "the self is implicated in all epistemological endeavors" (Heddon 7). The necessary

acknowledgement of subjectivity subsequently implicates an autobiographical aspect in any given piece of work.

In the previous chapters, I contextualized the subjects of my analysis within the genre of performance that the performers utilize. For *TRANSom*, I debated whether to contextualize the performance within the history of devised performance but have opted instead to generate an understanding of *transgender theater* through an exploration of the history of performance by trans artists within the United States. I acknowledge that this could be an entire other dissertation on its own, so I will make my analyses brief. I have also made my argument by asserting that there are few examples of trans-centric work that is not based on the auto/biographical, suggesting that *TRANSom* exists as an exception to a corpus of work which foregrounds the narrative of the self or a real life subject. By enumerating these performances, I intend not just to pay homage to the artists creating work that, for various reasons, could not be explored in more detail in this project. These are a few of the plays which inspired the work behind *TRANSom*.

In 1989, Kate Bornstein's play *Hidden: A Gender* premiered at Theatre Rhinoceros in San Francisco. The play follows the stories of two trans characters: Herman, a gender nonconforming person living in a contemporary time period who transitions from male to female, only to find binary gender to be the ultimate failing of their identity; and Herculine Barbin, a young intersex person being mistreated in the Victorian era. The character of Herman is a thinly-veiled representation of Bornstein herself, emphasized by her originating the role in its first performance. Much like *Uncovered*, Barbin is included as a figure of transness in history, with the features of her

story included from the novelization of her memoirs by Michel Foucault. *Hidden: A Gender* is a play that very well could have been included in this project as an example of a performance by a trans artist that engages with autobiographical material. It is excluded only due to time, resources, and its existence outside of the time period encompassed by this project. While I did not expect that *TRANSom*'s audiences would be familiar with *Hidden: A Gender*, the play exists as an addition to the repertoire of stage work created by trans people which deviates from a strictly autobiographical (re)presentation of the self. Additionally, many of the jokes and references in *Hidden: A Gender* are meant to speak to a trans or queer-identified audience, an intercommunity dialogue which *TRANSom* also sought to cultivate with its performance.

Contemporary work created by, for, and about trans people also inspired the work of ***TRANSom***, such as that of performer and activist Annie Danger, also based in the San Francisco. Danger creates solo and group performances that bring political action and activism into the dialogic space of the performance venue. In performances like *It's That Easy! With Terry Van Ween* (2010) and *The Hands That Feed You* (2020), Danger embodies fictitious characters or exaggerated versions of herself and weaves audience interaction with monologue and immersive storytelling to implore her audience members to look around at the atrocities in their own society, then get up and do something about it. Danger's collaborative performance piece, *The Fully Functional Cabaret* (2011), brings a cast of seven trans women together on stage in a vaudeville-esque series of skits and musical numbers which confront the audience with their own biases about transness, while also creating space for the women to celebrate themselves and each other.

TRANSom was, in part, inspired by *The Fully Functional Cabaret* in its tone of acknowledging the joys and sorrows of trans experience without falling into melodramatic tragedy.

There are also plays written by trans people that include trans characters but are not exclusively about transness. Performance artist Taylor Mac's 2014 play *Hir*, despite having a title that directly references gender-neutral pronouns, depicts a family in turmoil that includes but does not exclusively focus on a transgender character. That character is Max, a teenager typically portrayed by a transmasculine actor, who is in a process of medical transition and has started using the gender-neutral pronouns "ze/hir." Mac's play attempts to depict domestic dysfunction in a middle-class family, and Max's gender transition is only part of the backdrop to the play's overarching plot and message. While I take umbrage with the representation of a trans character that is meant to illuminate the ways that the world is rapidly changing and certain people cannot keep up (the protagonist of the play is Max's older brother, Isaac, who returns from military deployment to find his family and home in a state of disarray), *Hir* is nevertheless a part of the canon of plays which create opportunities for trans actors to play trans characters on stage.

META-COMMENTARY ON THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IN *TRANSOM*

I argue that part of what makes *TRANSom* a "trans play" is related to its content as much as it is the identities of its characters and performers. Aside from an all-trans cast of actors playing a community which only consists of trans characters, I have enumerated

above the ways in which our process of creating *TRANSom* centered our intention to create a show that would resonate first and foremost with trans audience members. As part of this mission, we included certain jokes or references within the script without explanation, assured that trans spectators would understand and feel directly addressed by the narrative. For example, the following dialogue exchange between Carolyn and Sandy, regarding the chore of bringing the mail into the house from the mailbox:

> CAROLYN: You know, the real job isn't bringing the mail in, but getting it out to everyone.
>
> SANDY: Jordan thinks we should make mailboxes
> Names on little cubbies for everyone.
>
> CAROLYN: That sounds like a kindergarten classroom.
>
> SANDY: We can call it Assigned Mail
>
> *SANDY waits for CAROLYN to laugh.*
>
> SANDY: Oh come on, that's funny.

Here, Sandy turns the accepted language surrounding gender identity and biological sex into a pun. What we demonstrate in that moment is the way in which trans people often make jokes about our own experiences with one another, solidifying that while our lives do not necessarily revolve around being trans, being trans is still a significant part of our lives. Additionally, we are able to laugh and find joy in our experience of being trans with one another. This moment was a particularly palpable one backstage – the actors would huddle together in the wing and listen to gauge the audience's reaction. Since it occurred in the third scene of the script, we began to use it as a measure for what kind of

energy the audience would bring to the rest of the show. It also communicated to us what portion of the audience was "in the know" about trans topics, with louder laughter generally being an indicator that the audience was able to recognize the pun and, therefore, had a particular understanding of trans-related terminology.

One of the major nods to trans culture and community was Max's profession as a YouTube vlogger. While older generations of trans people have relied on bound paper diaries to record their transitions, younger generations have turned to the internet to document their experiences of being trans and pursuing various modes of transition both social and medical. Over the past decade, there has been a proliferation of autobiographical and transition-documenting videos on the internet. Vloggers will usually begin recording these videos once they begin their transition, whether that be a social transition where they are out as trans in their daily life or medical transition, usually beginning with hormone replacement therapy. These videos typically feature a trans person sitting or standing in front of their computer, talking about their experiences out in the world as a trans person and, if applicable, displaying on their body the changes that they are or are not experiencing as a result of their medical treatment.

These vlogs, I argue, have usurped the written diary as the key artifact for trans people in compiling their own archive of trans identity and experience. In a 2014 article for *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Laura Horak notes the ways in which these vlogs have come under the same scrutiny and received similar critiques as written trans autobiography. Horak enumerates how transition vlogs have been criticized for enforcing ideals of the binary by implying that medical transition is an integral part of the trans

experience, which excludes the experiences of trans people who, for various reasons, do not pursue medical transition. Additionally, similarly to Namaste's critique of neo-liberal queer activism, critics have spoken out against the popularity of transition vlogs because of their focus on the transitional state of the individual, a narrow microcosmic focus which, these critics argue, precludes any conversation about the dangerous material realities of trans existence in a capitalist patriarchal transmisogynistic society such as the United States or Canada.

Transition vlogs have also not eluded the attention of people outside of the trans community. When I came out to my family, for example, multiple relatives sent me links to YouTube videos of other trans men's transition vlogs. One video was a compilation of photos, video clips, and audio documenting 10 years of one particular man's life, beginning from before he transitioned to the present day. My cousin sent the video to me after I told her I had started taking testosterone, and the context she provided for the video was that she found this man extremely attractive "regardless of gender." For the sender, the intention is often to demonstrate tolerance and acceptance. Well-meaning cis people who send their newly transitioning family members links to other trans people's YouTube channels are attempting to display their own process of coming to terms with their loved one's transition. In one way, my cousin was trying to communicate that she would love me no matter what my gender identity or presentation. In another way, she may have felt that she was providing me with information, a glimpse into the future for myself by way of the public access to this other man's journey. As such, the YouTube transition vlog functions for cis people very similarly to the way that it functions for trans

people. While fellow trans people can turn to vlogs to provide guidance on what to expect and how to prepare for the changes that come with medical transition, cis people can also find in these videos a reference point for what their trans loved one is going to experience.

In her article, Horak also posits that the videos function within what she deems to be "hormone time." This is an alternative to "queer time," whereby trans people who are pursuing and documenting their medical transition repurpose the linear structure of what Horak cites as a "Christian temporal structure--time begins with moment of rupture and points in a particular direction" (580). To support this theory, Horak references commonalities among transition vlogs regarding the traditionally Western chronological passage of time. Videos are often titled by the amount of time that the author has been actively pursuing their medical transition, such as the number of weeks on a hormone regimen or the number of days since a gender affirming surgery. Additionally, Horak claims there is a "temporal compression" in the common presentation of a time-lapse video of the subject's body over the course of the medical transition. These tropes are evidence of Horak's theory of "hormone time," and she goes so far as to argue that these videos are proof of a radical re-purposing of traditional Western understandings of time as forward-moving and linear. The vlogs, she claims, are much like the literary structure of the hero's journey, featuring a protagonist who faces a number of harrowing challenges before reaching a triumphant climax and resolution: the resolution being a sense of completeness within the subject's own body.

In *TRANSom*, Max never performs a traditional transition vlog. The closest that he comes to such a video is in the first video where he takes his camera through the rooms of Sandy's house, introducing his viewers to the other characters. While he brings the camera through the house, showing Carolyn on the couch, Bastion in the kitchen, and Margo and Jordan in the sunroom, he ends in his bedroom, of which he gives the viewers a miniature tour. During this tour, he zooms in on the bottles of testosterone on his nightstand, which he announces to the camera by saying, "Here's my bedside table with enough T to last a lifetime!" Then, the camera careens over to a stack of small barbells, where Max announces, "And here is where I'm getting ripped." He then turns the camera to himself and flexes a bicep at the camera before performing his video sign-off. This video confirms the audience's suspicions that Max is pursuing hormone replacement therapy. We also know that he has a work-out regimen presumably to aid in the masculinization of his body, as referenced by Raun in his article. But there are no videos where Max performs the rituals of the YouTube transition vlog. There are no videos where he enumerates and documents his physical changes over time, and aside from the opening video, this is the only time he references his transition.

As I was developing the character, I imagined that Max was someone who had begun medical transition early in his life, perhaps starting HRT when he was a teenager, and even possibly had top surgery before graduating from high school. This, however, does not align with my own personal history of transition, as I began taking testosterone when I was 29 years old and, at the time of the performance, had not yet undergone top surgery. However, a few dramaturgical decisions supported the dissonance of my

character's transition against my own. First, we agreed that the videos did not have to perfectly mirror or replicate reality. There were other aspects of the videos which did not match with the reality on stage: The house that was used for the introductory video does not have the same layout as the set, and the actors were not asked to maintain the same haircuts or colors as they appeared in the videos. Therefore, while the play moved in a linear fashion chronologically through time, the videos suggested a disruption of a stable sense of time and place, asking the audience to suspend their disbelief with what they saw on screen as much as what they saw on stage.

Furthermore, linear time was disrupted by my own transition progress and the archive of the video. Completely coincidentally, the production premiered on the five month anniversary of my first testosterone shot. In a way, the opening night performance served as my own transitional presentation, my live "five months on T" vlog post. But what that also meant was that, for the four-week run of the show, my body was changing with each set of performances. With each week that passed, my voice deepened, my facial hair grew longer and darker, and my muscles became more defined. Each performance featured a different version of myself, further along in my transition than the last. This is exacerbated by the videos, which were filmed a month before the performance premiered on stage. Therefore, on opening night, the video displayed my body a month behind in my transition than what was present on stage. The performance, then, lived within Carter's construct of "transitional time," which acknowledges that transition is not always a linear progression from one state to another with a stable ending point.

While the videos showed a past version of myself, audiences were asked to believe that it was the present version of Max, in contrast to the actual present version of myself that was on stage. This, too, functions as a sense of "temporal compression," almost akin to the time-lapse videos or documentation of "before" and "after" photos that Horak references as examples of the manipulation of the presentation of time in transition vlogs. Since I did not disclose my own transition process to anyone outside of the cast, audiences had no way of knowing where I was in my transitional journey during the production. But even without this information, they were still witnessing the presentation of my body's ever-changing state of being. Whether or not they realized it, audience members were witness to my transition with every performance of the production they attended.

Additionally, the YouTube trans community offers something that written autobiography does not: a visual reference of solidarity. A memoir or diary can offer advice and guidelines, narrative affirmation, and connection. But vlogs and video documentation offer a visual referent for others within your community. Just as I experienced when I attended Sean Dorsey's performance for the first time, there is so much power inherent in witnessing the existence of a body that looks like yours - or what you have only imagined your body to be. The character of Max exists as a reference to this type of young trans man: eager to let the rest of the world in on the details of his life, not just as it relates to his transness but also his journey as a young man navigating the world.

I argue that Max's vlogs partially satiate the audience's desire for an autobiographical aspect to the show. In between scenes, we catch glimpses into the domestic life of Max and the rest of his housemates. These are never opportunities for the audience to learn anything transition-related about our characters, but they serve a fictional autobiographical purpose. Much like diaries, these vlogs provide insight into the everyday lives of the characters. In the first video, Max gives the audience a tour of the house, introducing them to the rest of the cast (except Sandy, who does not appear in a video until the finale). The content is quotidian: in one video, Max watches Bastion sew up a hole in a skirt; in another, Laur confesses that he watches children's TV shows in his spare time; another features Max and Jordan in the car at the drive-in on a date that is planned in the scene immediately preceding the video.

None of the videos are framed as the single person "talking head" confessionals that are so prevalent with transition journal vlogs. Rather than showing one person talking to the audience through the lens of the camera, the subjects of the videos all speak to Max who sits off-camera in a style more befitting a documentary film. This disrupts the audience's sense of being a privileged confidante for the video's speaking subject. Instead, Max becomes the mediator of the information and the image, framing it the way that he wants to and asking the questions to which he wants the audience to have the answers. While these questions offer insight into the characters' personalities and inner lives, the conversations are never focused on the characters' transness or individual journeys through or around transition.

Additionally, the videos erect a boundary between the characters, the actors, and the audience. What plays out on stage is the story of the script, the steps along the narrative arc which include the rising action, climax, and resolution of the central conflict. The script as a constructed and fictional piece of dramatic literature is its own armor against the voyeuristic gaze of the audience, as the actors are only ever playing out a tale that is constructed and within the realm of fantasy. There is a layer of protection from the vulnerability of performing because the characters and their troubles are fictional, predictable, and have a known solution. What the audience witnesses live is the playing out of this tale which is entirely pre-constructed.

The videos are also pre-constructed and the actors are still playing their roles. However, the content is more intimate: the camera tightly frames only one or two people, and the videos, while outlined, were not scripted. For filming, actors were instructed to improvise a conversation which I led in my role as Max. Due to the nature of film production, we were able to shoot multiple versions of each video and choose the one that we felt was strongest. Actors were encouraged to make bold choices because we could reshoot or edit to our liking, a luxury not afforded in live performance. But there is an equal exchange in terms of vulnerability: the improvised videos allowed for multiple shoots but the actors were responsible for driving the narrative with their improvisation, whereas the live performance leaves little room for mistakes but provides the actors with a script on which they can rely. Put simply, neither the scripted action on stage nor the video clips create a space where the audience is directly addressed in a way that makes them feel as though the actors are available to them for interrogation or scrutiny.

There are a series of scenes in the live portion of the show in which the audience is directly addressed by the actors. These are the transitional scenes we refer to in the script as “Rituals.” We constructed these short scenes to serve multiple purposes. One was to illustrate the connection that the character Bastion had to the spiritual realm. We wanted to lend credence to Bastion’s investment in the metaphysical and spiritual, rather than make their belief in such things a joke and a flight of fancy. As such, these scenes took place in a space off of the elevated set of Sandy’s house, on the actual stage floor of GFT’s black box-style theater. This was meant to signify that these scenes were occurring on a different plane of existence than the rest of the show. More practically, the rituals also served to create more time for costume changes and prop preparation between scenes.

Each ritual began the same way: a sound cue of gentle chimes and a soft airy drone would begin in a blackout. Then, the spotlight would come up on a small circular rug set downstage right, on the black floor of the theater, off the wood floor of the dining room part of the set. From the stage left wing, Bastion would emerge in a flowing pink robe, carrying a small wooden table. They would set the table on the rug, then look out at the audience and bow in a gesture of welcoming. This was a repeated series of actions to signify the ritualistic quality of what was happening; setting the table was Bastion’s way of “casting the circle,” a set of actions performed at the beginning of many rituals of spellcasting in order to invoke spiritual energy. Finally, Bastion would return to the wing and bring to the circle the prop for their ritual, along with one other character, with whom they were sharing their sacred space for that brief time.

We envisioned Bastion's ritual space as being a metaphysical plane of existence that only Bastion can willingly access. Being able to access it without Bastion's assistance was not something that our worldbuilding allowed. The exception to this was Margo, who, by virtue of their deep loving connection with Bastion, is seen entering on their own: they walk in on Bastion rubbing orange peels on their face and, reluctantly, join in once they have entered the circle. But the other characters must be escorted in and we blocked this quite literally, as Bastion casts the circle, acknowledges the audience, then returns to the wing and guides their guest to the table, along with whatever materials their ritual requires. One could argue that, since the audience is acknowledged by Bastion, that they, too, are invited into the sacred ritual space. But in each ritual, the character who is invited in gets to physically interact with something in the space: Margo takes the orange peel, Laur and Bastion make lavender rosemary lemonade that they then drink together, Max carries in a plant and films Bastion playing the violin with the plant as the audience, Jordan brings a stack of papers which Bastion magically turns into a piece of origami. The audience is invited to watch and react, but they cannot *interact* with what is happening in the ritual space.

There are two videos which divert from the "day in the life" style snippets. The first is a confessional video from Max, placed in the show directly after three major plot events: the reveal that Sandy has cancer, Carolyn's demand that everyone move out, and the confrontation regarding Jordan's strange behavior toward Max. In this video, Max delivers a monologue about how the "drive for human connection" is a universal feeling, and that when people seem reluctant to connect with you, it may be a symptom of

something deeper that is troubling them. Max's advice as he signs off from the video is to "take care of yourselves and take care of each other." His ruminations can apply to any character in the play: Carolyn, who is desperately trying to preserve what she fears are the final moments with her wife; Jordan, who hides uncertainty behind standoffishness; Sandy, who refuses to ask for help when she needs it; even Max himself, who is so desperate to be liked that he's made an entire career out of being likeable and is plagued by the prospect that there is someone who is not interested in being his friend. What we do not get from this video is any insight into Max's transition, or the transition processes of any of his friends. When we dip into Max's psyche, or any other character's minds and lives, we tap into emotional intimacy and the personal moments of the domestic -- not the private world of the biological or physiological.

We also aren't given long monologues or lengthy exposition about any of the characters' backstories or experiences. When the play begins, we are dropped into a discussion between Sandy and Carolyn regarding Bastion's contributions to the upkeep of the household. Throughout that scene, we are given glimpses at the entire cast of characters, but they are just that: glimpses into the present moment. The script is expertly crafted so that the audience can begin to form understandings of the characters as fully-formed people through the dialogue without outright stating certain information. We learn that Jordan has a sister and typically has a difficult relationship with their mother, but that it is improving; Max's social media presence is hinted at as he makes his way to the door for a run with a comment about what it would be like to "live-tweet" his jog around the neighborhood; Margo is established as a successful writer as they announce

that they've won an award for their poetry. Most importantly, there is never an announcement of anyone's identity. The closest that we get to a moment where a character "outs' themself is right after Laur's arrival, when Margo asks him for his pronouns.

But the question of pronouns coming from another trans person has a different resonance than coming from a curious cis person. While asking for someone's pronouns has become a standard and expected practice in many circles, particularly in academic and liberal social spaces, even the act of having to announce one's pronouns can be a harrowing experience for trans people. Asking for pronouns or stating one's pronouns in an introduction to a new person is a way of signaling the understanding that our interpretations of other people's gender expressions is not a reliable indicator of the pronouns that they use. The practice acknowledges the difference between gender identity, gender expression, and how someone prefers to be referred to using language. But because there is already an assumption of pronoun usage based on a person's appearance, having to announce your pronouns or correct an improper usage of your pronouns places an emotional toll on a trans person, which is further exacerbated if that person is not fully out. However, in the context of Sandy's house, Laur is asked to reveal his pronouns in a space where trans people are in the majority (in fact, there are no cis people in Sandy's house at all). Therefore, the reveal of his pronouns does not place him in any danger. In fact, by announcing his pronouns, he takes a step toward acceptance within the house, as his pronoun usage affirms his trans identity within a community of people who have chosen to gather on the basis of their transness.

Affirmation and inclusion between trans people is the central force behind the final video depicting Max's "Trans Activist Series" interview with Sandy. In this video, Max interviews Sandy about her experiences as an activist within the trans community. She describes how she came to activism through experiencing the loss of societal privilege after transition: "I was a white man in corporate America, the whole world spoke for me. But suddenly, that wasn't the case anymore." Sandy goes on to say that she started advocating for the trans and non-binary communities because she felt a duty to show up for people like her. Nowhere in this interview does Sandy discuss the details of her transition, and Max does not ask. The information divulged remains entirely focused on Sandy's work, and her transition factors into that conversation only to the extent that it is relevant to the narrative surrounding her activism.

So much of the media surrounding trans identity and experiences has been created by cis people for a cis audience. This is the crux of the autobiographical imperative as Namaste has established it. Namaste cites daytime television hosts like Maury Povich and Jerry Springer, who have brought trans people onto their shows to be criticized and ridiculed as spectacles of human indecency. More recently, talk show hosts like Katie Couric drew public ire for their participation in the exploitative gaze of the autobiographical imperative. Couric was criticized heavily in 2014 for her interview tactics with trans model Carmen Carrera. During a segment on her daytime talk show, Couric asked Carrera questions about her genitalia. Carrera stumbled to answer, clearly taken aback by these questions. Later in the show, actress Laverne Cox appeared as a subsequent guest and chastised Couric for her questioning while on-air. Cox described

how the "preoccupation" with trans people's medical transition and biology precludes a discussion of "the real lived experiences" of trans people. This incident is one in a series of interviews lead by cisgender people which delves into the intimate details of a trans person's life without their consent, as if this information should be freely accessible to the public and is in some way relevant to other questions about the trans guest's career or accomplishments.

One of the driving forces of the play's narrative is that Sandy takes on too much labor in the home, never taking time to care for or focus on herself. Within the milieu of the play, this video allows Sandy the chance to tell her story. She is never featured in any videos before this, which means she never gets the chance to engage in a ritual in Bastion's metaphysical space or in any of Max's videos highlighting daily life in the house. The cancer diagnosis and subsequent decline of her health is what leads her to slow down, but even then, she is still concerned more about those around her than herself. The interview places the spotlight directly on Sandy, and through it we gain more insight into her backstory and life than we do with any of the other characters. At no other moment in the play does another character engage in directly autobiographical storytelling the way that Sandy does in the interview.

However, Sandy's interview with Max is not a tell-all exposé about her transition journey. At no point does Sandy speak about any of the medical aspects of her transition. Instead, Max's questioning focuses on the work that Sandy does within the trans community, her activism and what brought her to take on a socially-engage role such that she has at the time of the recording. Sandy's story also challenges the traditional

transition narrative in which the choice to begin a social and medical transition leads to the betterment of the person's life. Sandy speaks specifically to the ways in which she had, and then lost, a large amount of her privilege after she transitioned:

> SANDY: My world kinda fell apart when I transitioned and it was a huge eye-opener for me. I mean, I had everything going for me. I was white man in Corporate America, for God's sake... The world spoke for me. And suddenly - that wasn't the case.
>
> MAX: That sounds hard.
>
> SANDY: It was and it wasn't. At the same time it was hard, I was able to live my truth for the very first time.

Sandy's story illuminates the numerous roles that transitioning plays for trans people. Her story touches on the traditional sense of transition as a moving forward or toward a true self or a more actualized self, a positive motion of forward momentum. However, she also speaks to the lived reality of being a trans woman by acknowledging the different ways in which she must navigate the world when being perceived as a woman, specifically a trans woman, as opposed to as a cisgender man.

Additionally, Sandy acknowledges that her experience as a trans woman in a transmisogynistic world inspires her to begin working as an activist in her community. As the show centers around the community which has been created by Sandy's activism, this acknowledgment also turns Sandy's transition story into the origin story of a community. Rather than Sandy's autobiography placing only her in the spotlight, this video offers the story of Sandy's house, the location for the play and the primary reason that the play is happening in the first place. Without Sandy's house, there is no play. Without Sandy's transition, there is no house. Therefore, Sandy's transition is the catalyst for the play,

though it avoids ever delving into the details of what that transition entails. In this way, the play demonstrates that it is possible to acknowledge the importance and impact of transition without hyperfocus on (or even any mention of) the biological.

The final video also serves as a driving force of the show's timeline by revealing to us that Sandy has passed away. After the interview is over, before Max can sign off and end the video, Sandy reminds him that he promised that they could take photos using the filters on platforms like Instagram and Snapchat. The video fades, the music swells, and we see a series of photos appear on the screen: each character, with Sandy, using a different filter. Then, after all the photos featuring the younger members of the family, one large photo of Sandy and Carolyn, using a filter of hearts around them, fades into view. After a few seconds, the words "In Loving Memory of Sandy Ellner" float in front of the photo of the couple. The screen fades to black, and then the final scene of the play begins with MG, Bastion, and Laur in their new house, hanging a banner that reads "Sandy's House."

CONCLUSION

One of the main goals with our creation of *TRANSom* was to create a story that acknowledged the struggles of trans people without centering tragedy or suggesting that transness was the source of trans people's problems. Before the show opened, it became a bit of a joke amongst the cast and crew that it was difficult to describe the plot of the play without making it sound like a tragedy. But ultimately, I believe that we created a piece of work that ended hopefully. The loving matriarch dies, but her legacy lives on through

her chosen family. The placement of Sandy's interview at the end of the show, and using it to announce her death, is strategic not just for eliciting an emotional response from the audience. It also prevents the audience from hearing Sandy's story and then using it to view her in a different light than they did before they heard her acknowledge her life pre-transition. The chronology of the narrative's events and the dissemination of personal information, I hope, denies the audience the satisfaction of using Sandy's story to dissect her identity.

Ending the play on this moment of hope and possibility shifts the audience's gaze from the present moment of the performance to the imagined but unknown future of the play's characters. Sandy's story has ended, the only finite point of any transition narrative being one's death, but her legacy lives on in the work of her family. As I analyze the play for reasons why the assumption of the autobiographical prevailed, I wonder if placing Sandy's interview at the end is one more explanation for this phenomenon. Perhaps ending the show with the main character telling her life story was a move that ultimately led audience members to believe that everything they had seen up until that point should also be assumed to be autobiographical?

And if death is the only fixed point in one's transition, and to live a life is to continually change until death, then the end of the play also signifies the death of the characters in the show. "Sandy's House" does not exist, therefore, neither the audience nor the rest of the ensemble are able to do anything but imagine what the future of these characters might be. In this way, I see *TRANSom* as also a wider metaphor for the transition experience. Resisting the idea that transition is the movement from one fixed

point to another, one could also read the play in the same way: the characters start in one setting and end in another. The family moves from one house to another, one family structure to another, and Sandy herself goes from living to dead.

However, *TRANSom* does not offer a fixed ending point. In the scene change between the old house owned by Sandy and the new one in which we see the family one last time, the set shifted to take up half of the stage, and the furniture pieces were switched out for milk crates or covered with tarps to suggest that the remaining members of the family have just moved in. When Jordan and Max enter midway through the scene, they are carrying bags from the hardware store which contain swatches and brushes and are actively discussing what colors to paint the walls. Therefore, we end the play in a space of physical transition – the transition from the old to the new, and the transition from Sandy's house the building to "Sandy's House" the nonprofit. We resist the normative satisfaction of a narrative that reaches a stable ending point and, instead, rejoice in the possibility of a future that seems bright, but has yet to arrive.

Chapter Six: Connection and the Celebration of Change

As I write this concluding chapter, it occurs to me that today, March 15th, 2020, is the one-year anniversary of my first testosterone shot. I did not plan my writing schedule intentionally so that I would finish this project on the same date that I began HRT, but sometimes, the universe aligns the events in your life in ways that feel serendipitous, if not a bit contrived. At the same time, as I type this, the United States is being cautioned to implement social distancing and self-isolation in response to the spread of the COVID-19 Coronavirus. Events that would congregate over a certain number of attendees have been cancelled, drastically affecting, among many other things, the lives and livelihoods of artists across the nation. Here in Austin, South by Southwest, one of the greatest contributors to the local economy, was cancelled for the first time in its 34-year history. The general tone in both my professional and social circles is that of worry, dread, and irritation, to varying degrees. Many are out of work and we cannot even get together at a bar to commiserate with one another.

I had originally planned to gather my closest friends and chosen family to my house for brunch today to celebrate my HRT anniversary. But with the call to self-isolate to stall the rate of infection, I opted instead to follow the lead of my character in *TRANSom* and made a post on Instagram to commemorate the occasion. I looked at a few photos I had taken of myself around March 15th of 2019 and took a few new photos where I re-created the outfit, pose, and framing of the photo as best I could. Then, I used a photo collage app to place them side-by-side and uploaded the compiled images to Instagram. To accompany the series of comparison photos, I wrote the following caption:

> even in the midst of pandemic panic, life is not cancelled - take a moment to celebrate with me? 1 year ago today, i took my first shot of testosterone!
>
> some of you may know that ive been out as trans since 2009, but it took me 10 years to start HRT for a number of reasons. the day i called the kind clinic was the day i decided i gave enough of a shit about staying alive to do something that felt right but scared the hell out of me. i waited 6 months for my first appointment but after a decade, what was another half of a year?
>
> as you can see, many things have changed. but in addition to the external, my internal sense of self, of calm, of content, of peace, is unparalleled from any other time in my life. before this, i truly did not see any point in planning for the future because i was convinced i'd never have the courage to medically transition & had resigned myself to a short, miserable life. i feel so lucky that i had the means (access to a clinic, transportation), the resources (finances, healthcare), & the support to take this leap of faith to live my truth.
>
> thank you to all the friends who have been here with me on this journey [...] who have been by my side tirelessly through the past year & beyond [...] i am so blessed to have such a vast & deep well of love & care from you all

With this social media post, I participated in a long history of trans autobiographical transition narratives. My post perpetuates Horak's theorized "hormone time," and I have compressed the time that has passed by posting two photos, side-by-side, one year apart from one another. I eschew the acknowledgment of incremental change in service to a celebration of vast phenomenological differences. What the photos do not show are the moments in-between: the first two months when I looked, to my knowledge, the same as I had before I started treatment; the gradual filling in of my facial hair and the wisps of it that sprouted in disconnected patches from March until June 2019; the acne that has ravaged my face and back in waves that are as unpredictable as they are distracting.

I have also called my community to "celebrate with me." What is it, exactly, that we wish to celebrate in these moments? In my case, I am looking back on the day that I

began my medical transition and reflecting on how different my life is now. For me, that is an improvement, and I suppose my intention is to honor myself and the people around me who have supported me as I have worked to forge a life that makes sense to me. I do not conceive of my transition as a rebirth, I do not consider the name that I was given at birth to be my "deadname" – I am very much alive, and that the body that I inhabit is different now is not due to a death and resurrection, but due to the decisions that I have made in order to keep living.

But with timing such as it is, I am unable to gather my community in physical space with me. I crave the immediacy, the liveness, of their presence around me; the energy of their reactions to my joy; not just a verbal dialogue in a social setting but the dialogue that Deirdre Heddon claims is inherent in live performance. To hold a gathering in my home would be to present myself as Host, a term that feels loaded in this context. I am the Host of the party, the owner of the home in which we gather and the participant responsible for the comfort and contentedness of my guests. But I am also the Host of my own self, the body in and of which my self dwells, and this Host is what we gather to celebrate.

Without the ability to congregate physically, I turn to social media to satiate that desire. As I end this dissertation, I ponder the ways in which we can conceive of "trans live autobiographical performance" as a genre that lives beyond the artistic institution and into the everyday? Philip Auslander astutely noted that designating a performance or presentation as "live" was not necessary before broadcast radio, as it was only then that audiences became unclear whether or not the voices they heard were pre-recorded or

transmitting simultaneously as they were being heard. Now, we have the ability for anyone with a smartphone to connect with one another instantly and create content that can be presented, devoured, and responded to immediately.

In an article titled “Liveness Redux: On Media and Their Claim to be Live,” Karin van Es engages with the ways that media studies scholars have previously theorized liveness and the live and proposes that with the addition of social media and on demand media services such as Netflix and Spotify, liveness be conceived as “mutually rather different constellations of liveness” (1249). For van Es, it is not enough to simply understand what is being presented as live, but how and why and through what efforts and to whose benefit? To this end, she discusses the economics of live media with regard to the ways that cable television stations now compete using the promise of liveness. What makes liveness so appealing, van Es argues, is the feeling of *connection* between users or between users and institutions.

According to van Es, despite the fact that social media has been considered an opportunity to “democratize the media landscape,” many social media platforms have been “increasingly commercialized and today […] compete with broadcast media for consumer attention” (1251). To this end, van Es pulls from Nick Couldry’s "myth of us" wherein social media platforms perpetuate an idea of gathering space for users to interact with one another in cyberspace. Expanding on this, van Es uses the Facebook news feed as an example of an online public space tainted by consumerist interference:

> The live has an important role to play in perpetuating both the myth of the mediated centre and the myth of us. Facebook’s News Feed offers access to the

> lives of our friends as they unfold online. Although everyone has an individualized network, comprising 'friends', the people or organizations one 'follows' and pages 'liked', these connections overlap. As a result, a Facebook friend can become topical resources for discussion with other friends – much like in the scenario of collective viewing of events broadcast on television. (1252)

Unfortunately, van Es explains, sites like Facebook have integrated more and more corporately targeted content, such as news articles embedded into social feeds, which have deterred users from sharing personal information. In essence, van Es argues that Facebook's liveness is predicated upon the connection between the people using the platform. The "constellations of liveness" present in this process are the ways in which the platform is set up to encourage or deter interaction between users.

The parameters around what is shared and how on each social media platform is part of the "constellations of liveness" that van Es illustrates. How does commenting on a post written by a major cable network differ from commenting on a post written by your cousin? Likewise, in speaking about published written autobiographies by trans subjects, Jay Prosser makes note that many of these texts include a preface written by the clinician who treats the subject in their medical transition, such as Dr. Harry Benjamin's preface to Christine Jorgensen's autobiography. According to Prosser, the physician's foreword "'grants' the autobiographer a narrative voice, vouching both for its representationality (authenticity) and its representativeness (exemplarity)" (126). In essence, Prosser argues that the authority that is presumed to be held by the clinician lends a credibility to the author's narrative that would not otherwise have been granted, allowing it to be published and taken seriously on the market. Similarly, the performances that have been discussed in the previous chapters are also given a certain amount of clout by their presenting

organizations. That these performances all take place in venues that allow the artists to charge money for admission, as well as offering material support such as space or props, grants them a level of professionalism that would not have been achieved had they been presenting their work, for example, for free in someone's living room.

THE NEW TRANS FILE: FROM OBLIGATORY TO ONLINE

Additionally, what value is held in the authority granted to the physician who opens the autobiographical book when he is the gatekeeper of the very process that the book details? It is that which awards the oppressor the ultimate power in determining the terms, conditions, and authenticity of not just the narrative, but the subject's identity as a whole. This brings us back to Stone's "obligatory trans file," the collection of autobiographical materials by older trans women gathered by younger trans women in order to learn from them how to construct the most "plausible history" for themselves in order to gain access to medical transition.

Likewise, in the interview with Che Gossett quoted in the introductory chapter to this dissertation, Juliana Huxtable remarks that she sees social media as "expanding the possibilities for both archiving the present and finding ways of revisiting and rereading the past" (40). As was discussed regarding the YouTube vloggers who chronicle their transitions online, the lack of formalized mediatization works to foster a sense of connection and authenticity among the vloggers and their audiences. The comments section of YouTube invites viewers to engage with creators, even to the extent that they can initiate "parasocial relationships" wherein viewers believe themselves to be closely

acquainted with content creators despite never having actually interacted directly with them. Decrying the parasocial relationship, Megan Farokhmanesh cites the "entitlement" of YouTube vloggers' fans to the content creators' virtual output and personal information, which has lead to many video makers drastically changing their artistic practices or leaving the industry altogether. However, she acknowledges that the dynamic between creator and viewer is a "double-edged sword" – while devoted fans can make unreasonable demands of their favorite creators via social media platforms, their influence also means, to some extent, they share a role in the creation of the content itself (Farokhmanesh).

I posted the photo and caption celebrating and discussing my transition journey on Instagram because I wanted to feel connected to and in conversation with my community. Since I could not do that in person, I chose to do it in a space where I felt that I could foster that connection without the risk of contagion. When I posted the photo and caption, I received almost immediate feedback from my friends and followers. This feedback came in the form of "likes" on the post, comments posted in response, and even Direct Messages from some friends and acquaintances. As I received the feedback, I responded in kind by replying to comments and messages. This created a cycle of communication wherein I posted something, I received responses, I responded, and was responded to again, etc.

In this way, I was contributing to my own archive. But what is now also collected in that archive is not just the comparison photos of what testosterone has done to change my body, or the ways in which I chose to contextualize those change. The archive now

also includes the support and love of the people with whom I chose to share that information. Every comment and like is now a testament to the community of people who chose to let me know that they are happy to see me in transition. My archive now consists of evidence that my transition is occurring within a community of support.

SURVIVING TO THRIVE, THRIVING TO SURVIVE

What this experience illuminated for me was the ways in which the performances that I have discussed, and any live presentations of trans people's autobiographical narratives, are more than performances: they are celebrations. That the performer exists at all is a testament to the desire to stay alive, to continue to inhabit the body that you have, regardless of the medical measures you may or may not have taken to alter it. The embodied presentation of their stories in a live performance context allows them to, as Juliana Huxtable states, "[dictate] the terms on which [they're] establishing [their] own history" (49). In essence, I have argued that live performance allows trans artists to present a narrative of their past using the changing present body as a way of collectively imagining the potentials of the future.

But just like the posting of my one-year testosterone anniversary photos, each of the performances in this document are celebratory in their own way. In *One Woman Show*, Shakina Nayfack invites her loved ones and supporters to witness the realization of the dream she conjured while subjected to discrimination and abuse, and to help make her next dream (the dream of her vagina) become a reality. *To T or Not To T* is narratively and theatrically structured around a celebration – D'Lo and Anjana's commitment

ceremony – where Appa finally uses D'Lo's pronouns, allowing the audience to partake in the celebrations of Appa's and D'Lo's journeys simultaneously. Sean Dorsey and his ensemble paying homage to Lou Sullivan's diaries celebrates the pioneer activist's life and, with it, Dorsey's hard work to become an equally influential figure in trans culture and history. And again, while *TRANSom* was not autobiographical in its script, it offered the chance for audiences to witness seven trans people on stage together, celebrating the cast's hard work as performers and as members of our wider community.

Therefore, I posit that each of the works discussed here are performances by trans performers that encourage mutual celebration between performer(s) and spectator(s). I address the complex history that trans people have had with the autobiographical, including its uses in the medical industry and the violence imposed by the autobiographical imperative. I hope that this work encourages future live performances of trans autobiographical material to flourish and thrive.

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